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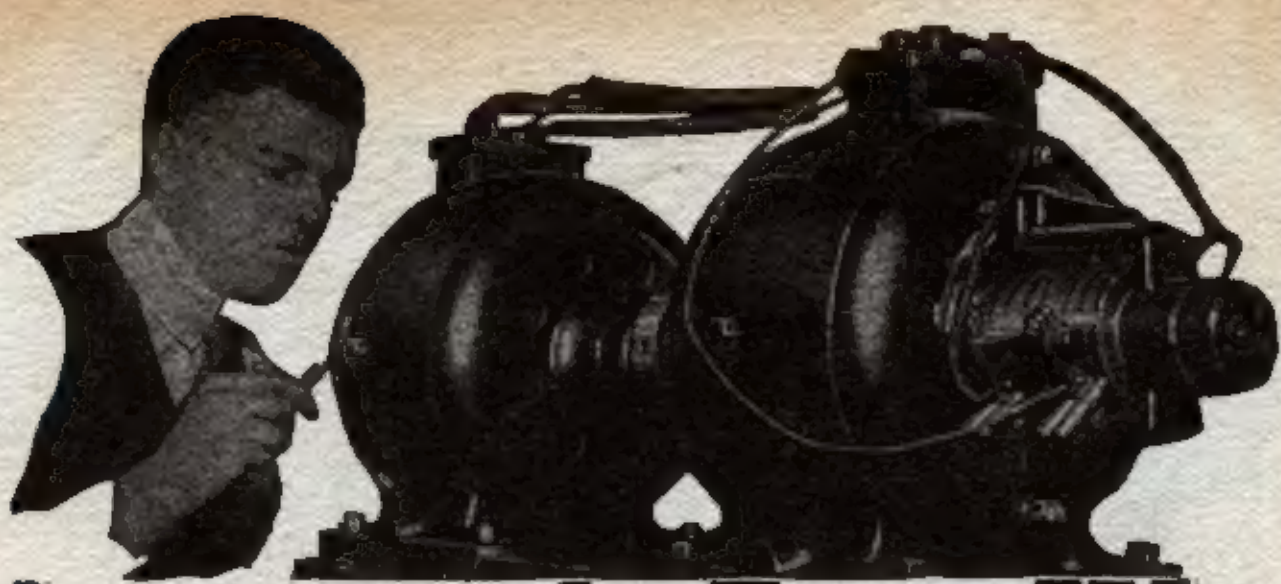

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404 North Wesley Ave., Mt. Morris, Ill.
Published by
STELLAR PUBLISHING CORPORATION
H. GERNSBACK, *Pres.*
I. S. MANHEIMER, *Sec'y* S. GERNSBACK, *Treas.*

Vol. 2 No. 2

WINTER 1931

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taken from Ray Cummings' thrilling story, "The Mark of the Meteor" we see the gigantic meteor just after it has plunged through the bow of the doomed space ship. Shooting vertically upward in a vain effort to change the course of the ship, the rocket exhausts flame furiously. Mars in the background gleams green and gold.

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Publication Office, 404 N. Wesley Ave., Mt. Morris, Illinois. Editorial and General Offices, 96-98 Park Place, New York City
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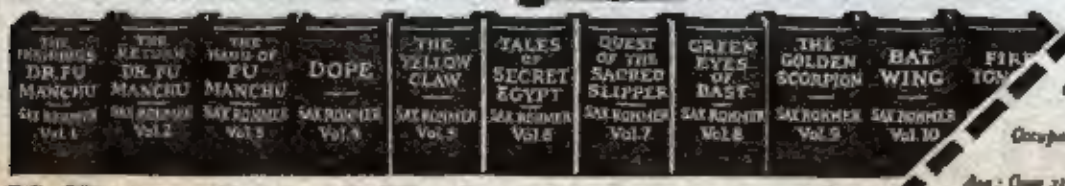

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Vol. 2 No. 2

WONDER Stories Quarterly

WINTER 1931

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WONDER FACTS

By HUGO GERNSBACK

IN a recent statement, Sir James H. Jeans was quoted as saying, in view of the fact that certain stars are apparently receding from us at the rate of 26,000,000 miles an hour, in his opinion, such incredible speed could only be accounted for by the fact that we are in the midst of an exploding universe.

Here indeed is food for thought and, if we ponder the statement by one of the foremost scientists in the world, we immediately begin to see the tremendous import of the idea.

Everything in this world is relative. A microbe is born, lives and ripens to old age in the space of a few minutes. To it naturally, this space of time is as great as the span of a human being who lives from seventy to eighty years.

Benjamin Franklin once wrote a very interesting essay on the *ephemera*, a fly, which lives but a single day yet, during that time, it no doubt experiences the counterpart of our own full lives.

The conception of time, therefore, we must recognize being as relative as the outer things in our material world. The thought has often been advanced that the universe in which we are living is simply another sub-universe, merely on a larger scale. We are perhaps a world within a greater world, too great for our senses to comprehend and everything being relative—with time relative too,—there would seem to be no good reason why indeed our universe is not simply some microscopic world, enlarged to us on a tremendous scale.

Take a stick of dynamite and explode it. To our senses, the explosion is completed instantaneously; since the whole process has involved but a small fraction of a second. Yet, even in the comparatively crude stage of development which photography has reached today we can take motion pictures of this explosion, and throw them slowly on the screen; thereby apparently lengthening the time from a fraction of a second into minutes. Later on, with better machinery, it will be possible to expand the time element from a fraction of a second to hours. We can even conceive that, a hundred years from now, by some superior motion-picture device, it will be possible to photograph particles of exploding dynamite so that they will appear at rest; and, finally, the individual atoms might be shown shaken by the explosion. Thus it might take hours to repeat the events that took but a fraction of a second originally.

This is precisely what Sir James Jeans means when he says we are living in a veritable explosion.

Reckoned in the scale of human measurements, our universe may have an age not much greater than a few billion billion years. Although this is staggering to our time conception, it may be only a fraction of a second in some other time equivalent, where events are reckoned on a different and vastly larger scale of time values. In the meantime, the explosion of our own universe is going on at a terrific rate and in a fraction of a second—in some other super-time equivalent—the explosion will be over and our universe scattered. Yet to us in our apparently slow time equivalent, the explosion may go on for several more billion billion years.

A daring idea, and indeed stranger than the most bizarre thoughts of any science fiction writer.

The Next Issue of WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY
Will Be on Sale March 15, 1931

The Scarlet Planet

by **Don M. Lemon**

Illustrated by Paul

Quickly attaching himself by a chain to a torpedo harpoon he had shot himself into celestial space.

IN another moment the great Hersovitch-Chang planet-plane had docked in a shallow bowl between two low wooded hills, and before opening an air port the little crew took an atmospheric test of the strange scarlet world on which they had arrived. To their astonishment and gratification they found the atmosphere very similar to that of the middle lands of the temperate zone of the earth in early spring.

"A land-leave, little corporal!" cried Bailee. "A three hour land-leave! I'm so ship-sour my liver feels like hell's vacuum cleaner."

"Amen to that," growled Hal-Al. "What's three hours when we've nothing to do here but grease a chair with our own fat."

Davidson considered the situation. Hal-Al, Bailee and himself, were all that remained of a crew of ninety. The others, with one exception, had perished on the planet Kopex located about a half x-ometer* distant, where this unit had gone in search of a suitable world to which to send a colony of Arctic Americans from the overflowing earth. Davidson had accompanied this expedition-unit in a minor position as corporal, on condition that he should be allowed the privilege of making certain scientific notes for the Bolivia Geographical Society, that was then engaged at the difficult task of mapping the little known third myriad; but his real purpose for joining the party was to run down a rumor that the Master Criminal C-X had been seen on the planet Kopex. At the last balloting of the secret Ninety-Nine, Davidson had drawn Circle 27, and as Kopex fell just within this circle it was his great privilege and danger to search on that planet for the Master Criminal of the cosmic universe The removal of C-X by death or capture would serve to promote Davidson to the front ranks of that noble organization. Here was a prize worthy of his attention.

But the annihilation of the entire expedition-unit, except four of its members, and the imminent danger of death to the latter, had caused Davidson to abandon Kopex and turn back for reinforcements towards Xea. A chance remark by Bailee that the planet on which they had just landed was as scarlet as 4-X-Olite had aroused the corporal's curiosity and he had docked the plane for a brief inspection of the soil of this strange, colossal world floating in the emptiness of cosmic space.

Since the supreme scientific mind of the earth, Thor Maximus, had discovered the salts of 4-X-Olite early in the thirty-second century, the color scarlet had become the predominant color in the minds of all men, for the salts of 4-X-Olite, the proper use of which increases the life of man almost indefinitely,* are of a warm, passionate scarlet.

The fancy had seized Davidson that this scarlet planet might derive its color from some crude form of 4-X-Olite in its soil. This super-precious substance was becoming yearly rarer on all the

*A new method of astronautical measurement equal to ten times the earth-sun distance or 930,000,000 miles.

*They were discovered to counteract the destructive effect of cosmic rays on the human body—which wear out tissues and cause death by old age.

known planets, and its value increasing proportionately. A few ounces of it would make a man financially independent for a decade, and being in but modest pecuniary circumstances, the little corporal was not adverse to any adventure, with honor, which might offer to increase his income.

"Very well," consented Davidson. "Three hours land leave, but a day in the dikes of New Asia for every minute you overstay leave." From an observatory window in the super-planet-plane he saw his companions leap upon the scarlet grass with two radiocycles and make away on their wheels like schoolboys released from school. He envied them their youth, their exuberance of spirit, their very limit of intelligence, though they were not fools by any means.

In mentality they ranked only 12bx and 12cx respectively, Hal-Al shading just above his friend Bailee by reason of his slightly superior concentration. Davidson ranked 37hx, which was greatly superior to that of the younger men, but when he considered such minds as Chang O'Riley and Coli Toro who ranked 107x he felt that he had no sufficient grounds for any self flattery.

DON M. LEMON

IN many ways the present story is one of the most unusual we have had the pleasure to publish. Not alone because it is completely realistic and the characters are persons that we can feel and think with; but also because the experiences they pass through and the way they handle them has the stamp of truth.

Men who range into the unknown will find that they must leave their politeness and culture behind them; they will, on other planets, have to deal with the raw, elemental things in life; and have to adjust themselves to a completely new kind of existence.

Some men will crack under the strain of fighting unknown, unseen forces on a strange world. Some will go mad, others will give way to cowardice and still others will show unsuspected heroism and powers for leadership. Besides giving us a world of new knowledge, and changing our conceptions of our Universe therefore, interplanetary travel will certainly keep our race young, strong and versatile.

As a "different" story, we present this for the approval of our readers.

THREE hours passed — four — five — but the absent men did not return, nor send a radio message. There seemed nothing for Davidson to do about the situation but wait, and waiting under tension is a hard game to play, particularly when one waits alone. The little corporal found it so, but it was not his fault he was alone.

All the planet-plane's crew, except himself, Hal-Al, Bailee, and one Jaquet, had been taken in a trap set by the inhabitants of the planet Kopex, and had perished. These four had fled back to the plane and proceeded towards Xea for reinforcements. On the way the man Jaquet had choose to release himself of material existence. He had got up from dinner one day and hurried into the t-h-tube, the other men thinking that he wished merely to satisfy himself about some machinery there which he had shortly before brought under discussion.

But quickly attaching himself by a chain to a torpedo-harpoon he had shot himself into celestial space. They took a thirty second tele-cinema of his flight on the harpoon as evidence of the fact, to turn in with the planet-plane log, and closed the incident of his suicide in their minds.

This man Jaquet had not been accepted for the expeditionary-party to Kopex, but had stowed himself away in a thermo-jacket in an evaporated-food refrigerator, and had not been discovered till the plane was an x-ometer distant from the earth. He had then succeeded in entertaining the crew with a magnificent word-panorama of a seven years journey across the Milky Sahara, that was believed to divide the material world from the semi-material or quasi-spiritual. Possibly the man was only circumnavigating his own hat, but then a first-rate liar is ever more entertaining company than a prosy truth teller.

The greatest book in the world is the Thousand and Two American Nights by Sing Hop Smith which is true only to the universal truth of pure entertainment.

Suddenly Davidson gave a shout, at sight of a little distress-parachute from his absent friends floating towards the planet - plane. He raced up to the foredeck and springing into the small but powerful *Veda* hydro-terra scout plane,* rose like a hawk after a bird. He seized the parachute and returned to the foredeck of the planet-plane. Here he hastily examined the white silk message tag sewed into the parachute. In Hal-Al's hurried but legible handwriting was the startling communication, *Save yourself, we are lost.*

*Operated by atomic disintegration.

Davidson's jaw stiffened and he glanced behind him. There were two supply chests aboard the hydro-terra, which would allow him to remain away from the planet-plane for several weeks, and he need never touch the ground in that time, since he could set the plane to continue automatically in a circle aloft while he slept.

He decided to use the little H-T in scouting for the missing men, as it would be far less conspicious than the great planet-plane. Rushing below and seeing that Chang and Chow (the cat and dog mascots aboard the planet-plane) had a liberal supply of food and water, he pressed the key that closed every ingress to the plane but the foredeck door, so that no one unfamiliar with the plane could gain an entrance. He then returned to the foredeck, closing the door after him and setting the secret combination from the outside which fastened this door.

Missing!

STEPPING into the *Veda* scout plane he shot up into the bright air, recalling as he did that the days of this colossal planet were each equal to six months of earth time, and he had little cause to be anxious about the coming night, still many weeks distant.

He headed in the direction from which the distress parachute had approached, and flew rather low, straining every nerve to locate the missing men, or some clew to their whereabouts. Shortly he made out two radiocycles* stacked against a tree. The men had probably left them to go on for a ways afoot and reconnoiter, and had been captured. He dropped lower, sized up the situation, considered it worth the chance of attack to regain the radiocycles. Nosing down and avoiding the tree branches, he grappled the machines with the automatic tongs and shot upwards with the two light but powerful wheels clutched safely underneath the plane. He hoisted them aboard. They showed no evidence that the men had been attacked while riding. Evidently they had been caught afoot after heedlessly leaving their machines.

A little further on he came upon evidence that made him groan. His binoculars showed him all the clothing of the two missing men scattered along the ground over an area of not more than fifteen square meters. Had they been stripped naked and taken on from here as prisoners, or had they fought to their death, and until every garment had been torn from their bodies?

Landing, he recovered the clothing, but found no message from the men. He ran the plane slowly along the ground and succeeded in distinguishing some faint footprints, which continued about ten meters. Then these footprints ceased as abruptly as if the two naked prisoners had been lifted up into the air, or carried down into the earth.

He could find no evidence of any entrance into the earth, and he questioned if this planet possessed airplanes, for he had not seen any bird or living thing capable of flying since he had landed on this great scarlet world. And it had long been postulated by no less an authority than Ramey, that the super-intelligence of any planet of the third myriad could not rise in mechanics above the mechanical suggestion of the animal creatures and vegetable growth, or mineral formation, of that planet. So if the two men had not been carried into the air or underground, they must have been lifted into some form of vehicle propelled along the ground.

He now came on four separate indentations in the ground, which he judged must have been made by four unicycles, or similar conveyances. He found he must take a chance and continue running along the ground, as these tracks were too faint to be distinguished from a height no greater than the low tree-tops.

He had proceeded some distance across a rolling and slightly wooded country, when he sighted four sphere-like objects, three of which were about four meters in diameter, while the fourth was half again as large. These spheres were gliding, not rolling, along at the slow pace of not over fifteen miles an hour. He had all along been distressed with the fear that perhaps he had taken the wrong direction and had followed the tracks coming and not going, but it now appeared luck had favored him.

For a moment he was almost persuaded to retreat, speed back to the planet-plane, and returning in that great super-machine,* swoop down on these spheres and scoop them up like four marbles. But should he let them from his sight five minutes he might not again be able to locate them, as they could disappear into some secret underground passage. Then, too, it might prove a foolish piece of business to take these spheres aboard the planet-plane till he was better informed of their power.

He decided to remain in the little H-T and make an attack from the air. Rising, he ripped the silence with a scream from the siren, then shot away to a distance of about two hundred meters, and, without landing, scanned the spheres through his binoculars to learn the effect of the siren on the ears of the enemy.

He gave a shout. The spheres had come to a sudden stop, no doubt to seek the cause of the noise. Immediately they formed into a square, each about ten meters distant from the other, then Davidson's jaw fell in utter amazement. He could not credit it. He examined his binoculars and looked again. It was true! Out in the open, on the level ground, the four spheres, three of them at least four meters in diameter, and the fourth larger, had totally disappeared.

CHAPTER II

The Struggle Against Darkness

DAVIDSON shot ahead and hung at a height of about thirty meters directly above where he had last seen the four spheres, but they had vanished like bursted bubbles.

"Must have dropped through a trap in the

*A vehicle of two wheels propelled by the disintegration of radiolite—a radium compound.

*The super-planet-plane has this name to distinguish it from ordinary interplanetary ships. It's about 300 feet long and 200 feet across and operated by atomic engines.

ground," was his terse yet uneasy comment to himself.

He mounted to a height of two hundred meters and watched the country about for a sign of their reappearance.

Ten minutes later he saw them through the binoculars, gliding orderly along, evidently having come from some underground passage. He might be mistaken in their identity, but as there were four, and one larger than the others, he was reasonably confident that these were the spheres he was seeking.

He decided on coming again above the enemy to send a koto* bullet ripping down the edge of the smaller sphere bringing up the rear, and watch the effect. Perhaps some sort of porthole would be thrown open and he would know better how to crack these great nuts. He steadied his automatic and fired. The sphere that had been hit slowed up, then stopped, and through his binoculars he could see a slender stream of bluish liquid pouring from its side.

The three other spheres now stopped and, coming back, glided about their injured companion, but no porthole of any kind, so far as he could observe, was thrown open, and no living creature came from the spheres. Yet from the actions of the latter he was positive that there was some living and sympathetic intelligence housed in each one, and these were not merely great metallic balls directed from a distance by wireless or other means.

The larger sphere placed itself about fifteen meters ahead, while the two smaller uninjured spheres ranged themselves close against the sides of their injured companion, as if to guide or bear it along, and they had proceeded scarcely twenty meters in this manner when they vanished completely and instantly in the open, as they had done before, leaving Davidson in amazed despair.

He condemned himself severely for alarming them twice, but what better could he have done under the circumstances? He had not dared drop a j—a-egg** on one of the spheres and blow it apart, for his friends might have been in that particular sphere. Since his bullet had penetrated one sphere and crippled it, he decided, should he locate the enemy again, to put a bullet into the outer edges of the three other spheres and cripple them all alike. Then they might not be able to submerge or escape, and the living intelligences within, would be compelled sooner or later to expose themselves.

It was an hour before he picked them up again, after he had become desperate with the fear that he had lost them entirely. He barely glimpsed them along the border of a distant, scattered wood, and giving instant pursuit quickly had them again directly below the speedy H-T plane. They were still proceeding with the larger sphere ahead, and the injured sphere aided along by its two companions. With three shots he ripped a channel down the edge of each of the uninjured spheres. This was the last time he proposed to treat the enemy half-way civilly.

A stream of bluish liquid began to spout from each sphere where his bullet had penetrated the side, and now he gave a shout as a porthole was opened in the largest and a human figure sprang to the ground and made off towards the woods. He gave a second shout as this figure was followed by another human form. He was certain these stark-naked figures were Hal-Al and Bailee, making a break for liberty.

He pressed the siren key, ripping the air with a far-reaching and unmistakable half whistle, half screech. The two runners stopped, looked upwards, waved their arms towards the plane, then vanished completely from view in an astonishing cone or funnel of darkness thrown from the larger sphere, exactly like light from a searchlight. Davidson sent the two men the siren call to turn to the left, but something seemed to detain them in the impenetrable shaft of darkness. He again gave the call, but they did not come from the black ray, and acting with more daring than caution, he dropped directly down to the earth where he had last seen them, forgetting to stop the engine in his haste.

HIS heedlessness saved him, for the instant he came into the black ray he crumpled up in his seat, unable to move a muscle, like a man stricken with total paralysis. But the still active engine drove the plane along the ground till it was carried beyond the ray. Here he was himself again.

He got to his feet in rage. This sphere had not only smothered his two helpless friends in pitch darkness but had directed on them a ray capable of temporarily paralyzing the man caught in its vibration. But for the mere chance that he had failed to stop his engine he would not have escaped himself. He rose like a flash, before he should again come into the enemy's range, and turning the nose of his plane on the larger sphere played the cyclo-gun* directly upon it. The sphere rang like a great bell pounded by a hundred hammers and began to spout all over with little jets of blue liquid, but the black ray continued to issue from its side and conceal everything in its path.

He now directed the cyclo-gun on the three other spheres, riddling each one in turn. While he was about it he proposed to make a thorough business of crippling the enemy. This work accomplished with a dispatch almost equal to the narrating, he awaited the next move of the foe. He hesitated to make another move without some regard to the immediate consequence. These spheres possessed power of the most treacherous nature, little to be suspected from their simple appearance.

The next move came. The three smaller spheres glided rather uncertainly apart in a line behind the largest sphere, as if they proposed to proceed in single file, but when they stood about ten meters apart the black ray issuing from the larger sphere dimmed, faded, then ceased, and

*An explosive bullet that generates a terrific heat.

**An intensely explosive shell which by the very vibratory effect of its explosion causes almost a disintegration of its target.

*An automatic gun operated on a rotating pivot which shoots koto bullets.

simultaneously all four spheres vanished as if they had been mere illusions.

No longer could Davidson believe that the spheres had submerged into the ground. He hung scarcely thirty meters overhead and he saw no evidence of the earth receiving them. He looked forward to where he had last seen Hal-Al and Bailee, but he could not locate them, though the belt of darkness had been wholly withdrawn.

There seemed but one means by which this situation could have been achieved. These spheres were playing upon one another, and on the person of their escaped captors just ahead of them, some powerful, mysterious ray of light which caused everything in its path to become *invisible*. He was simply looking through these gliding globes as through a perfectly transparent pane of glass.

He flew just above the spot where he had last seen his friends which he judged would be the direction taken by the invisible ray and removing his cap dropped it from the plane. It turned over, caught the air like a little parachute, then vanished like a light snuffed out. It had fallen into the ray that made everything invisible in its path.

He was puzzled how to act. These damaged spheres could glide slowly forward, pick up the two men lying helpless in their path, by reason of the paralyzant ray still playing upon them, then proceed on their way. He could not follow the enemy concealed by this invisible ray unless he could occasionally glimpse a rock or tree disappear from sight in the path of the ray.

Yet could the spheres proceed at all, riddled as were their whole outer shells, if not their inner, by his bullets? Would they not have to play possum, lay quiet and wait for him to depart, or for help to arrive?

But now he believed he saw the spheres proceeding slowly forward, four faint ghosts of objective matter. He followed, questioning if he was not following his own illusions, and hesitating to drop a j-a-egg amidst the three smaller spheres lest his friends in the larger sphere might be injured by the explosion, or be slain by the enemy for his act.

They Retreat!

HE continued to follow the four phantom spheres, till they came to the shore of a river when they again leaped into perfect visibility. The invisible ray had been withdrawn, or its power exhausted. In another moment the naked figure of Hal-Al sprang from the larger sphere, closely followed by that of Bailee.

Both men dashed for the river, which was scarcely thirty meters away, but before they reached it a ray of darkness came from one of the smaller spheres and smothered them in its obscurity.

Davidson shot down over this sphere and emptied his automatic into the lens from which the black ray proceeded. From within came the squeal as of a frenzied pig, then the engineer within the sphere seemed to go crazy. Like a mad brain in a great round skull and spinning wildly about, the sphere plunged into the river and disappeared in a swirl of bubbles.

Released from the paralyzant black ray, Hal-Al and Bailee sprang up and plunged into the water. Davidson gave a shout of gratification and flashing above the larger sphere dropped a j-a-egg just behind it and shot away like an arrow, before the force of the explosion could catch him. The egg failed to shatter the sphere which evidently was composed of some ductile material that could be pierced but not shattered but sent it spinning forward into the river, where it immediately sank.

He whirled about and returned to the scene, slipping another clip of cartridges into his automatic as he came. He must now depend on his automatic for instant action as he had emptied the cyclo-gun and had no more shells or j-a-eggs but in one of the locked chests aboard.

Two of the spheres remained, and he might not have any such luck with these as with the others. He maneuvered above them; he dared not charge them from the level or attempt to pick up the men in the water, for should they once succeed in directing the paralyzant ray upon him he would be totally helpless; and with him out of the fight Hal-Al and Bailee would be quickly recaptured.

He waited for the enemy's next move, expecting that they would make use of the black paralyzant ray to trap the two men in the water, but, instead, they turned the invisible ray upon themselves and vanished in that mysterious light. He strained his eyes and picked up their two faint ghosts, gliding slowly away. They had funked at last.

He delayed a few moments, then dropped to the surface of the water near where his friends were visible, leaving a little power on so that the hydro-plane would continue to run along the water, should he become helpless. He called for the men to clamber aboard.

"Wow!" yelled Bailee, scrambling to the floor of the plane, with Hal-Al beside him. "Let her out, corporal, and we'll come back with the flowers."

The plane rose to a height of about one hundred meters and the two dripping men sat up and solemnly shook hands. Suddenly Bailee gave a yell and pointed to the rail at his right.

CHAPTER III

The Vision

AS Bailee pointed a huge dripping, naked red form of some half-human animal swung over the rail to the floor of the hydro-terra. Then Davidson saw a mass of naked legs, arms, thighs, knotted in fierce combat, and heard the cracking of sinews, snapping of teeth, and grunt of battle. From amongst the mass he picked a hideous half-hog, half-serpent head and smashed at it with a heavy wrench.

The tangle unknotted itself and Hal-Al and Bailee stood up. Seizing a coil of rope from a pin, they proceeded to tie the human monster to a bar of the plane, but he came to consciousness without any warning and, expanding his hairy

chest and twisting his powerful limbs, snapped his bonds. The two men sat on him and tied him down with heavier cord, then squatting one on each side began to curse him.

Davidson well knew the versatility of his companions in this respect. Their voices rose into a veritable chant of malediction. He let them rave, for they had earned the right, and it would have been cruelty to strong men to have restrained them.

When both men were finally satisfied and sat wiping the blood of conflict from their naked bodies, Davidson spoke. "We will now return to the planet-plane, after first disposing of this native."

"You see him yourself, corporal," said Bailee.

"I do," nodded Davidson.

"He climbed into the plane from the water, of his own free will and sweet accord, like a butterfly into a blossom."

"It seems we didn't drag him aboard."

"You propose to run up about a thousand meters and drop him back into the water? Gentle, like a mother with her first born."

"Hardly," Davidson frowned. "He's alive and half-human."

Hal-Al and Bailee sighed. "But he belongs in the water," said the latter. "The crisp, bright water."

"Scarcely," replied Davidson. "I think rather he escaped from one of those spheres that rolled into the river."

Again the other men sighed.

"Then you propose to keep him for a butler on the planet-plane," said Bailee.

"And give him a blue suit with big gilt buttons," nodded Hal-Al.

"It would be better to land and drop him off here, where he can pick up his companions."

Again Hal-Al and Bailee sighed in unison and looked at one another.

"He'd make a fine corpse," said the latter.

"May I kiss him good-by for you, corporal?" said the other man.

Davidson sensed the dangerous rage of his companions under their banter. "Why this vindictiveness?" he asked. "I never knew you to hold a grudge against an enemy who put up a man-size fight."

"Pah!" spat Hal-Al. "First he made us blind, then he paralyzed us. That's no man's fight, that's a dirty disease!"

"And before that," said Bailee, "he came out with only a breech-cloth on him and ordered the girls back into the big pink machine."

"Girls!" exclaimed Davidson.

THE younger men exchanged glances. "It was this way, corporal," said Bailee, at a nod from Hal-Al. "We hadn't gone far on our radiocycles when we came to the clearest stream we ever saw, with the water so cool and crisp that we looked about for St. Peter and the big admission gate. Then we heard laughter."

"Tell him about that," nodded Hal-Al.

"You couldn't tell of it! You could just fight for it! Sweet, like a bubbling fountain of honey!"

"With rainbows in it," said Hal-Al soberly.

"With rainbows in it," agreed Bailee. "We left our machines leaning against a tree and stole ahead and peeked through some tall, feathery, sweet-smelling fern, and there—"

"Were seven of them," said Hal-Al.

"Just seven," nodded Bailee.

"Seven what?"

"Girls!" replied Bailee. "Seven girls a-splashing in the water and laughing."

"Handsome?" questioned Davidson.

Bailee shaded his eyes with his hand and looked off as if he saw visions. "I'm content to live here, and fight here, and die here!"

"There are better and stronger words for the same idea," said Hal-Al. "But let these pass for my sentiments."

"Seven of them," continued Bailee. "And we couldn't have stood there seven minutes—only a minute to a girl, corporal, when a life-time wouldn't have been long enough for the first good look at one of them!—when up glides a big pink ball as big as a house, and this dirty fish," he nodded towards the captive.

"This filthy hog!" snarled Hal-Al.

"This rotten mackerel," continued Bailee, "came from the pink ball and ordered the girls inside."

Hal-Al groaned. "And they went!"

"They went," resumed Bailee, "like honey back into the comb, like butterflies back into the chrysalis! Then he shut the port door on them and the big pink sphere glided away, and he got into a big gray marble that came along with the pink marble—the one you blew into the river—and followed the pink marble."

"And you followed them both," laughed Davidson.

"So we did, corporal," replied Bailee. "We left our machines and hiked after the spheres on foot a little ways, forgetting everything but the girls and planning to rescue them."

"But did they need rescuing?"

"Pretty girls always need rescuing," grinned Bailee. "Then this deficiency fish here must have seen us following, for he whipped the big gray marble about and blinded and paralyzed us with a black ray, and, while we were helpless, stripped and took us into his marble. Here he put us inside a cage with ropes for bars, and then turned some kind of juice into the ropes that made them white hot, so that we couldn't crawl out."

He displayed his right hand with a nasty burn across the palm, evidently caused by grasping a very hot wire. "Twice the juice went off the ropes and we made a break and got out. The first time he got us back by paralyzing us with that dirty black ray; but the second time—"

"Here we are," growled Hal-Al, shaking his own burnt palm at the prisoner roped to the plane. "And here he is, waiting for the judgment day!"

"And the three of us his judgment day," said Bailee.

After a brief silence Hal-Al inquired,

"You didn't chance to see what became of the big pink marble. We couldn't get a look out of our caboose."

"I didn't see any pink sphere," replied Davidson. "It must have left you before I arrived."

"We might look about a bit and pick it up," grinned Bailee. "And roll it back to the planet-plane and let the girls listen to our phonograph."

"A good idea!" nodded Hal-Al, without looking towards Davidson. "The girls would certainly appreciate the society of three white men, and one of them a handsome corporal."

Davidson overlooked this bribe of flattery. He thought the best way to handle the spirit of mutiny in his two companions was to appear unaware of it.

"We'll return to the planet-plane," he said, "and shift to some other locality, where we can start all over without the handicap of the evil reputation we have acquired in these parts. The water and soil may be excellent, and this may prove a far more desirable planet than Kopex on which to plant a colony from the earth."

"The water *is* excellent," said Bailee soberly.

"I noticed the soil is excellent, too" nodded Hal-Al.

Davidson now came above the wood where he had left the planet-plane. A half oath, half groan escaped him.

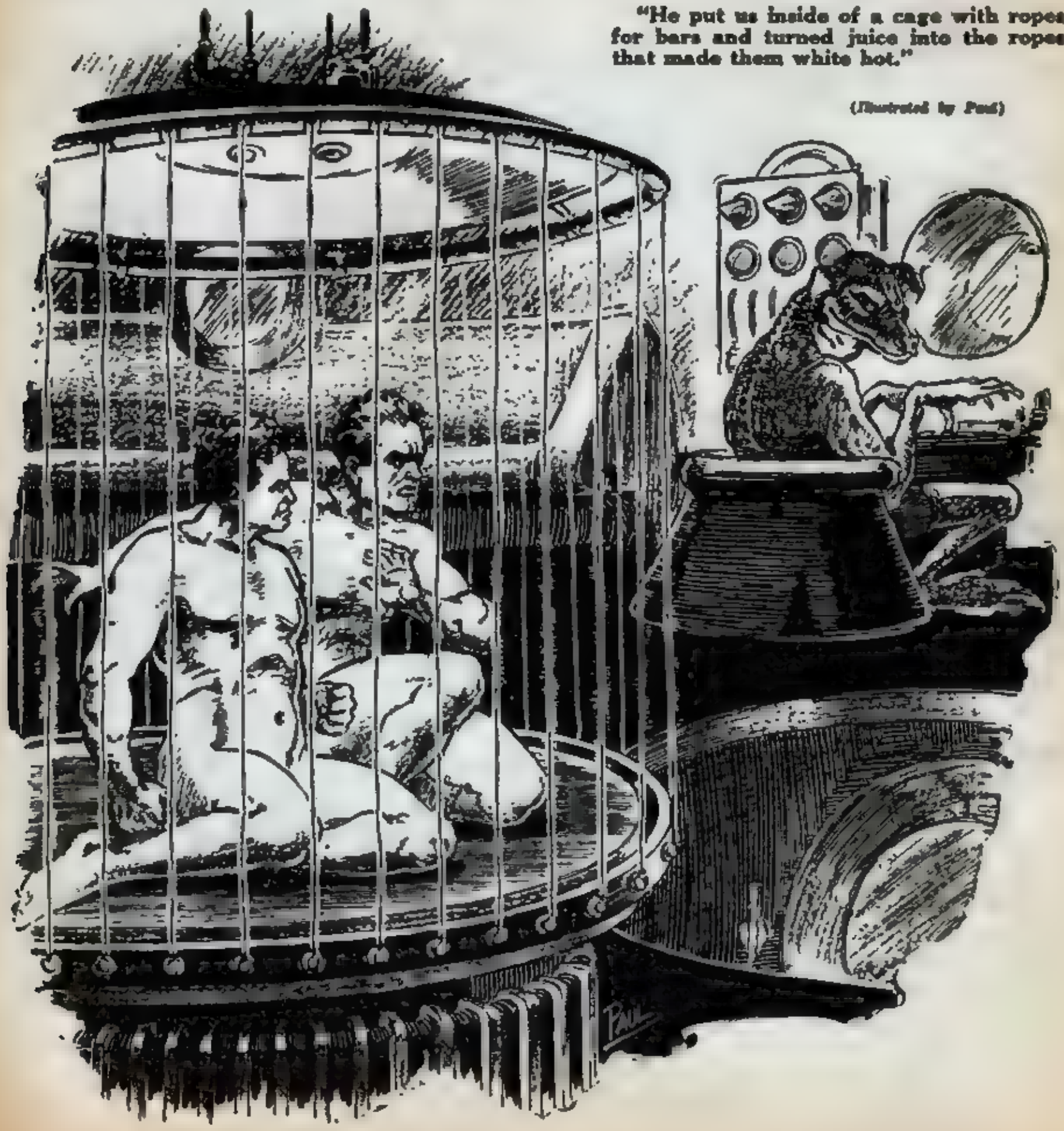
The great plane was gone!

Marooned!

THE little corporal threw back his shoulders. He must not allow any spirit of fear or des-

"He put us inside of a cage with ropes for bars and turned juice into the ropes that made them white hot."

(Illustrated by Paul)



pair to ride his neck because of the loss of the planet-plane.

"Well, men," he said, "the plane is gone!"

"It's a devil of a shame!" sighed Bailee. "We'll never see the old earth again." He licked his burnt palm, perhaps to conceal a smile.

"Nor the moon!" said Hal-Al.

"Its recovery is not beyond hope," Davidson cheered himself. "Meantime we'll keep our prisoner, for we may be compelled before we find the plane to eat grass and roots, and he'll select them for us with more knowledge than we possess."

"It's fine water and fine soil," grinned Bailee. "And where there's fine water and soil there's always fine eating of some sort."

"Fine grass makes fine steaks," nodded Hal-Al cheerfully.

Davidson saw that his companions were not to be fazed by the extreme situation in which they were placed by loss of the planet-plane. Adrift on a strange world among half-human monsters, with only a few weeks' supply of power to keep their little hydro-terra scout-plane in active service, they were likely to end their days as slaves of a strange race. Their intelligence might prove much higher than that of the natives, but there were but three of them to perhaps countless millions of the latter, and physical numbers would master intelligence.

They began searching at once for the planet-plane, proceeding from the supposition that it had been carried away along the ground, for they had seen no evidence of it having been destroyed, and doubted if it had been borne away through the air.

If there were any form of air-going machines on the planet there surely had been means in the spheres to look for danger from overhead, yet there had been none. They were reasonably confident that no eye had looked upwards from any of the spheres, or the enemy had acted differently during the attack from overhead by the H-T plane. The skies were a mere void to this strange race.

The younger men re-dressed themselves, then Bailee went off on one of the radiocycles to reconnoiter the wood from which the planet-plane had been stolen. He returned shortly and expressed his belief that the planet-plane had not been carried away by any means without, since the indentures in the ground at that particular spot where the plane had stood showed that it had arisen and left by its own power impelled from *within*.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Davidson. "Only a man familiar with that type of plane could have got inside, in the first place, and after getting inside he would have required an a-b grade training* at least to have known how to manipulate the keyboard and rise."

"Only Chang and Chow were aboard," considered Hal-Al. "But maybe they got into a fight on the keyboard and hit off the right combination, and the plane rose."

"Some cat and dog combination," smiled Davidson. "But who released the quadrant?"

*This meant five years at a university devoted to spatial navigation.

"The ghost of Jaquet," said Bailee soberly. Jaquet was the singular and mysterious character who had cast himself from the planet-plane some x-ometers distant in celestial space. "I never spoke of his ghost," continued Bailee. "I thought I had merely breathed too much radiogas and was seeing things, but one night I saw the man's face peer around a door at me—this was *after* he shot himself off on the t-harpoon—and when I got up and looked behind the door he wasn't there."

Davidson mulled over this idea a few moments, then rejected it.

"Won't do," he said. "There are too many natural reasons to be considered before we need come to the supernatural. I am almost persuaded that these inhabitants possess airplanes and simply came along in several monster planes and carried ours away intact."

Bailee shook his head. "It mounted from its own power. There was the kick of the heel-ball* in the soft ground."

FOR a moment Davidson suspected that the other was seeking to deceive him, that he should believe the planet-plane had fallen into the power of the supernatural and it would be hopeless to search for it. Yet there was such an honest, steady light in Bailee's gray eyes that the little corporal was quickly satisfied of the former's sincerity.

Accepting his statement as true that the plane had arisen from its own power, there were two conclusions to be drawn. The intelligence of these inhabitants was so great the they had been able within a short time to get inside the plane and manipulate the keyboard, or else—an idea came to him spontaneously, yet it was so plausible and so wholly free of the supernatural, that he was instantly convinced that such indeed had been the case. The man Jaquet had *not* shot himself from the planet-plane on the t-harpoon, but merely a dummy of himself, and hiding about the plane had awaited the opportunity of making himself sole possessor of one of the most perfect and valuable mechanical possessions of the earth.

A gravity-free car of faultless precision and miraculous speed in which he could travel about through all celestial space, and, if he chose, make himself a pirate on the universal sea of ether, gathering together a crew of subtle minds that might threaten the peace and prosperity of entire worlds. Or remain a solitary, wandering dreamer, soaring through the fields of space till death stayed his hands at the master-keyboard of the super-plane, and he plunged with it to wreckage and oblivion against some rock-ribbed world or flaming comet.

"However, we are going to make a stiff search for the planet-plane," affirmed Davidson. "Life has its many little wakings, but this will be the great awakening to us three if we fail to recover the plane."

"Remember there were seven of them, all bath-

*These planes possessed monster shock-absorbing balls for landing on strange worlds.

ing in one river at one time," said Hal-Al. "Why should the heart of a man despair?"

"Seven of them!" grinned Bailee. "And the waist of a pretty girl is home, sweet home to me."

CHAPTER IV

A Second Shock!

THEY laughed with the joy and freedom of young men attached only to the universal, and so content anywhere. But the little corporal was still possessed with a desire for the old green earth and its honors, and wished to return to it and claim his reward for bringing the planet-plane safely back after the loss of its crew, and move up a degree in the society of the Runners of Navare.* Then there was that secret business that had brought him so far from the earth on the ballot of the Ninety-Nine—that vital matter of tracking the Master Criminal and bringing him to book. The greatest voluntary work at which any man might be engaged and the successful conclusion of which would rank Davidson as the foremost benefactor of the age. Unless he could recover the planet-plane and return to Kopex with a full crew, it was not likely that he would have a second chance to come upon C-X, the Master Criminal.

"We are going to make a stiff search for the planet-plane," he again affirmed. "We are but little more than three naked brutes adrift in this trifling H-T, but with the great planet-plane we shall have something to say that will be respected by these inhabitants. Our word here will carry just as far as our total physical smashing powers."

"From the head of this fellow, it would seem so with him too," nodded Hal-Al, poking a thumb at their prisoner. "He looks like a hog that intermarried with the snakes, and they compromised on the worst parts of both families."

"Where do you suppose they get their handsome girls, if the men all look like this cherub?" demanded Bailee. "They must be looting some other planet of its finest, and we would be doing a favor to virtue to stop their dirty tricks."

They immediately began a search for the missing plane, risking their liberty, perhaps their lives, to a possible enemy, by approaching the spot where Davidson had left the great celestial dreadnought, and seeking for some trace for its removal along the ground. But they found none, and concluded that the plane had been lifted by its own power and vanished across the trackless heavens. To search the skies in the little H-T would be as hopeless as to search the Pacific in a canoe for a lost cork. Besides, they could not ascend in the H-T above the atmosphere of the planet, nor even to its full height.

"We might as well take out citizen-papers and join the strongest union here," grinned Bailee on what would have been the next day by earth time. It was however only twenty hours later in the long sunlit afternoon of many weeks duration.

"It looks that way and growing stronger in its resemblance," agreed Hal-Al. "Let's jolt a native out of his big marble and go gliding along till we knock up against something harder than ourselves."

The little corporal disliked to leave the locality where he had last seen the planet-plane; it seemed like severing their only connection with the earth. But if the man Jaquet had stolen the plane he certainly would not return to the neighborhood, while if it had been carried away by the natives, they would more likely hear news of the plane in the cities or villages than in this far frontier, as such it now appeared to be to the three men.

They rose to three hundred meters and, circling about, discovered several spheres below, all moving separately, but in one direction. They decided to take that direction also, and after a two hour flight glimpsed what appeared to be a drove of wild game headed towards a wood, and descended to try their luck at stocking their larder.

THEY found the game to consist of small, fat, pig-like animals somewhat slow of foot, and leaving the H-T they gave chase and bagged three. Carrying their kill over their shoulders they turned back towards the little plane, but the distance proved greater than Davidson had anticipated. He breathed a sigh of relief as he came in sight of the hydro-terra, which was docked on the edge of a long level stretch covered with short, fine scarlet grass, giving the effect of a rich velvet carpet thrown over the soil. Should the little scout-plane have met with any misadventure during their absence Davidson would have bitterly blamed himself for leaving it in the excitement of the chase, with their captive bound helpless to a railing.

In another moment his relief turned to despair, *for the plane began to run along the ground as if preparing to ascend!*

With a shout the three men threw down their kills and started at top speed towards the moving plane.

"All our smokes!" Davidson heard Bailee breathe, as the latter passed him, with Hal-Al but a few feet behind, and the fear of losing their tobacco must have lent miracle-shoes to his companions' feet for the little corporal had never before witnessed such sprinting by amateurs.

He raced on close behind, realizing that every moment might meant a year added to their lives, for practically all their ammunition was aboard the plane. He had glimpsed a huge pair of shoulders mounted with a queer-shaped head looming from the pilot-chair, and knew that their prisoner had escaped from his bonds and taken possession of the H-T. He recalled the latter's little pig-serpent eyes continually watching him while at the keyboard of the hydro-terra, and as it required but three simple moves to start the plane and hurl it like an arrow into the sky, their late captive might rise before they could cover another fifty meters.

"On!" Davidson cried, having no breath to spare for a longer encouragement, but his companions were running for the love of Lady Nicotine and needed no other spur.

*A secret order, which by its power and influence virtually controlled the earth, and kept law and order. To be a member meant the opportunity for honor and distinction.

They now came to where they had left their two radiocycles having removed them from the plane to use in chasing the game, but abandoning the machines when the game took to the woods. Hurling himself astride one of the cycles, Bailee shot like a gray bolt after the plane. He was followed by Hal-Al on the other cycle. The little corporal raced on after them afoot, greatly encouraged for a moment, but only for a moment, for the H-T, with its far more powerful engine, immediately speeded up. Would it rise before they could board it?

The two men on the radiocycles closed up the distance, and came almost upon the plane, racing straight towards it, depending on their own skill and the faultless brakes of their cycles to save them from collision, when the plane rose directly over them and Davidson saw one man, now racing frantically throw up his hands and attempt to seize some ropes trailing below the H-T. He soon succeeded and was swept from his radiocycle, but he couldn't tell whether it was Hal-Al or Bailee. He plunged forward, shouting for him to hang on.

For a moment the man hung fast, spinning in the air, then the rope was cut, or broke with his weight, and he was hurled to the earth. The other man was still racing beneath the plane on his radiocycle, and now Davidson saw his arm go up and the next moment a huge bulk plunged from the plane to the ground. The man-monster had been picked off the hydro-terra by a bullet from an automatic in the hands of one of his pursuers.

Davidson's attention was now wholly directed towards the H-T. Would it run low and become entangled in the trees, or rise and be lost to him? It rose slightly and shot away towards the north.

"All's over!" he gasped, coming to a stop. He saw the man on the radiocycle circle about and heard his shout, as he pointed at some object on the ground, then he dashed away on his cycle after the plane, evidently hoping to keep it in sight!

Unafraid!

THE little corporal hurried forward to where the other man had been thrown, knowing now he was Bailee, for he had distinguished Hal-Al on the radiocycle by his voice. Suddenly he drew his automatic and, dropping to his knee to steady himself, fired at a huge form not over thirty meters away that had risen from a cluster of tall grass with a large rock poised above its head, as if to dash it at some object on the ground.

The man-monster plunged forward and began to lash the grass like a struck crocodile, and Davidson rushed upon the scene and dragged the unconscious form of Bailee from the concealing grass, where the man-monster had sought to brain him with a heavy ragged piece of blue quartz. He worked about ten minutes over his friend, wholly disregarding the enemy in the grass, under the impression that he had received his death wound.

Suddenly Bailee opened his eyes and began to assure Davidson that there were seven of them. The latter sought to ease his friend's mind by assuring him in turn that there was only one, and he was dead. But Bailee maintained with considerable heat that there were seven of them, and it was almost impossible to see any particular one of them because he couldn't keep his eyes off the others at the same time.

Then Davidson got it that Bailee was referring to the seven girls he had seen in bathing and not to the pig-serpent-headed monster. At this he laughed and fell in with Bailee's temporary delusion, due to his fall. The latter now staggered to his feet and begged his friend to join him in an effort to capture the pink sphere and the seven girls. However, a few minutes later, Bailee came from his fuddle and began to swear like himself, demanding what had happened after he had happened after he had grasped the rope.

The little corporal brought his companion's mind up to the moment by explaining he had been thrown and got a jolt in his continuity box. Then he told him he had finished the man-monster and went over to take a look at the body in the tall grass. *The enemy was gone!*

They searched all about, but the native's snake instincts had served him well. Scotched as he was, he had slipped away through the grass to the woods. They wished him luck, but the worst sort, then recovered the radiocycle that Bailee had ridden, mounted tandem and, riding back, gathered up the three animals they had killed. They now must husband all their resources. Without further delay they set forth to trace Hal-Al.

At times this proved easy to do, by the track of the other radiocycle in the clean soft soil, again it was very difficult, and once it seemed impossible. But always they picked up the trail and kept on. At best they and their absent companion were but three sticks of humanity lost on a great planet of unhumanity, yet if these three sticks could but cleave together they might make a bundle difficult to break.

After a couple of hours they heard the blast of a radiocycle horn. Had the pilotless plane descended to the ground and had been located by Hal-Al, or had the dim gray doors of the trackless distance closed on it forever? A little later they were joined by their friend, returning. He had come to a wide stretch of water which he could not cross and given up pursuit of the vanishing plane.

They threw themselves from their cycles under some oak-like trees.

"Well, men, we're up against the real thing," said Davidson.

"We're the real thing ourselves, corporal," replied Hal-Al easily. "Now for a smoke, which will make us feel like some more of the real thing."

Bailee rolled and lighted a cigarette. "It's great to be born of woman," he grinned. "But greater to be born of your own resolution. Fall to, corporal, and metamorphose your cares into smoke."

DAVIDSON fell in with the spirit of the younger men, for courage and physical cheer was now perhaps the highest form of wisdom, since they were practically stripped down to their bare fists in the big arena of this new world.

"It's a cheerful planet we've landed on," mused Hal-Al. "Fat game, and plenty of sunlight and distance."

"I always was too healthy for the earth," said Bailee. "And the doctors said I needed a change of climate just for that, before it became chronic."

The little corporal saw that the two men were oozing with health and good spirits, not merely assuming their mood in bravado. So in spite of his disgust at himself for having left the plane alone with their captive aboard, he felt fairly cheerful too. They had got off with their lives and in the years to come might recover the planet-plane, or get together sufficient intelligence on this scarlet planet to build another plane that would carry them back to the earth, or to some world in communication with the earth.

Before his two companions—cut off from communication with the earth and former associations—should feel so free that they would put him from all authority over them, Davidson hastened to profit by his superior rank to state that thereafter they would walk the radiocycles, riding them only in dire necessity, since there was power remaining in the machines for not over five thousand miles of travel. The younger men accepted this as a sensible proposition, and the little corporal felt greatly relieved that they seemed to have no intention of throwing off his authority. Disunity amongst them could react neither for their good, nor his.

They now agreed to go on until they came to the water that had turned Hal-Al back, and here kill and dry a sufficient stock of game to supply them for some weeks, then press on down the water to human or quasi-human habitation.

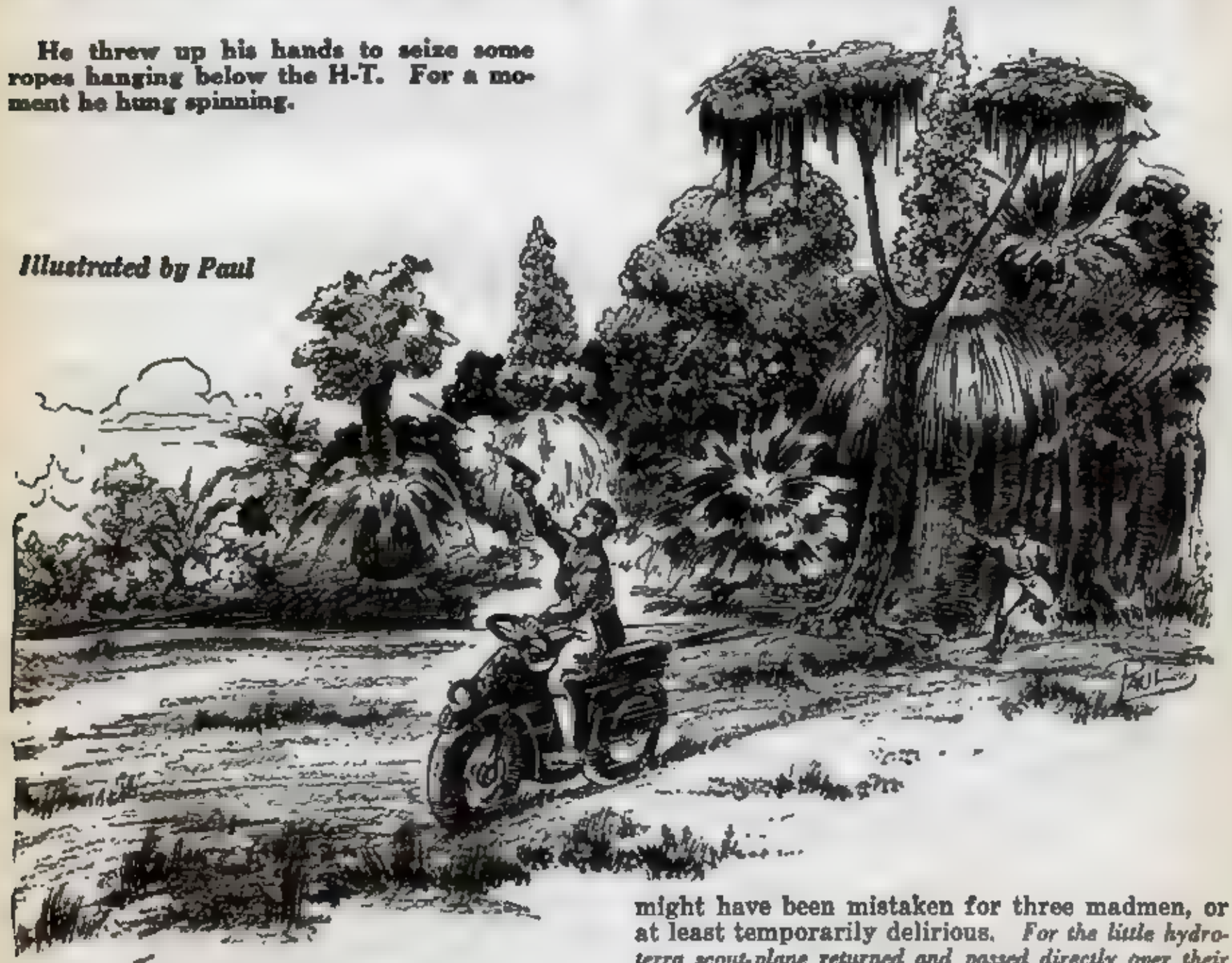
When they came in sight of this water a single glance assured Davidson that they had come to the edge of a continent, for before them evidently was a sea and not a great river or lake. Yet when he tasted the water he found it was not salty, but it possessed a pleasing tang like the juice of a fine grape fruit, and it was very clear, cool and satisfying. The men drank sparingly at first, but, experiencing no ill effect, partook of the water later without reservation.

Animal life was plentiful in the neighborhood, those who were running, jumping, walking, spinning, crawling, tumbling, climbing; but at no time did they come on any flying creature, though they met with one kind of game with a plumage composed of fine feather-like hair. This game could run swiftly, but not fly, having no wings or tail but possessing a soft, curly comb the whole length of its body. It proved to be very fine eating and its eggs, though small, had much of the flavor of mushroom.

From their little stock of supplies on the radiocycles they found sufficient materials to make two sturdy slings, and with these simple but efficient weapons by selecting compact round stones which threw very true they were able to kill all the game they required and so save their koto shells. Twenty hours after pitching camp they might have been mistaken for three madmen, or at least temporarily delirious. *For the little hydro-terra scout-plane returned and passed directly over their heads at an elevation of scarcely twenty meters!*

He threw up his hands to seize some ropes hanging below the H-T. For a moment he hung spinning.

Illustrated by Paul



CHAPTER V

A Strange Scene

THE three men raced beneath the little scout plane that had returned above their camp,

gesticulating and shouting for it to stop, as if it were a human intelligence, or such an intelligence was aboard. But they soon realized that the plane was pilotless: the automatic pilot had been set, they judged, for the three hundred mile circle. Traveling at the very slow rate of fifteen miles an hour—which seemed a reasonable estimate—the little H-T would pass over their heads every twenty hours, deviating slightly from a perfect circle in the still air.

In less than three weeks it would fall somewhere along that circle for lack of power-fuel in the reservoir. But perhaps half its course lay over the water, and should it alight on the water and a tide drift it from its circle they could scarcely hope to recover it.

They tentatively decided to wait until the plane should fail to reappear in a reasonable time, then follow its circle around as far as possible and trust to luck to pick up the machine. It was possible that they might obtain some kind of power-fuel which they could adapt to running the engine, if they were fortunate enough to recover the plane itself.

When Bailee next came back to camp from a short excursion after game, Davidson saw him give Hal-Al a signal to join him privately. By their secret manner he suspected that they were up to some adventure with a spice of danger or deviltry in it, and when a little later they slipped off together, unconscious that he had suspected them, he hastily covered the two radiocycles with a quantity of branches and followed. He proposed to back them up in any danger, or draw them off from too great a risk. Besides, he was curious to witness this adventure which, to judge by their secrecy, was too choice for his confidence.

He sighted them, without being observed himself, about a quarter mile from camp, just as they had stopped to slap one another on the back in high delight over some matter. They hurried on and shortly brought up on the further side of a narrow wood, where a wide sparkling stream mingled its waters with those of a little inlet of that sea by which they had encamped. He stole forward to where he could better overlook this charming scene and beheld a sight more fit for the old Greek gods than for the eyes of three wandering mortals from the very modern earth.

On the opposite side of the stream—which was about twenty meters wide, quite shallow, and very clear, for he could see the stones lying upon its bed—was a great scarlet sphere fully seven meters high, glowing like a jewel in the clear, warm sunlight. To one side of this sphere stood a giant man-monster, with a serpent-pig-head. He was nearly three meters high and nude but for a girdle of silver-like scales encircling his loins. His arms were folded and he stood as motionless as a column of stone.

Amazing as was this sight, Davidson gave it but brief attention, for it lacked the appeal of that other sight which he beheld along the margin of the stream. Here seven maidens, at first glance exquisitely human in every aspect, were dancing bare-footed along the purple sands of the stream, every little while skipping into the water, then back to the shore.

The little corporal trained his binoculars on this group, and but for the astonishing largeness of their eyes and the smallness and intense scarlet of their mouths, he could not at first distinguish the seven dancers from as many super-beautiful maidens of the earth. But those amazingly large eyes, which were as clear through his powerful glasses as if their owners were smiling into his face, testified to a different and more animal-like race than humans of the earth, while all the motions of these girls supported this fact. They moved at times with the cat-like grace of panthers and again with the fluttering motions of birds and moths.

WHAT was the nature of this scene? Was this giant the slave-chaperon of these exquisite creatures, or was this type of monster but a kind of great dog trained to watch over his owners, and not regarded as high as a slave? Or could it be possible that this giant was the husband-master of these maidens, and the control of the planet lay with such hands and minds as his? Certainly he made a heroic figure, towering there seemingly as immovable and inflexible as a tawny stone image of some strange deity.

Davidson now turned his binoculars on Bailee and Hal-Al to enjoy their delight at this scene, and just then he noted the latter thrust out his right hand as if pointing towards the giant. Then he smothered his own cry of protest, for it was too late. Hal-Al had pulled the trigger of his little Metzer and sent a slumber pellet* straight for the tawny stone-like image on the opposite shore. The pellet caught the giant in his left leg. He struck at his leg as if some insect had crawled up and stung him, and he sought to brush it away, then again folded his arms and gazed inflexibly before him.

A half minute later the man-monster unfolded his arms, opened his snake-pig mouth in a yawn, then sank down peacefully on the sands in a sleep that would last about six hours, unless broken by a counter-pellet.

The little corporal, crouched behind the trunk of a large tree, watched his two companions as they stole upstream and proceeded to ford the water. Evidently they proposed to capture the scarlet sphere and seven maidens, and, should they succeed, would no doubt bring the whole prize into camp with uproarious delight and offer Davidson a share of the spoils. But the latter resolved to cross their plans.

As a Runner of Navare he could not allow their adventure to succeed. The seven lovely girls were clearly not in distress, but seemed in full enjoyment of life and happiness, if not entire liberty. They might be daughters of high degree and any affront to them would cause the guilty parties to be hunted down like a pestilence.

He felt that it would be entirely useless, and might betray their presence to the girls, to attempt to call the men back, since neither his present small authority, nor the memory of his for-

*A little bullet-capsule containing enough cocaine to put one to sleep.

mer greater authority, would move them in the presence of these beautiful girls. As they came opposite him he shot them both in their legs with his own Metzer. Suspecting the nature of the stinging sensation in their limbs, the men fell flat on the ground and sought to crawl back the way they had come, but sleep speedily overtook them.

It was now up to the little corporal to ford the stream and remove his friends from the danger of any chance observation by the seven girls, or others remaining in the great scarlet sphere. He was about to proceed in this undertaking when the girls became aware that the giant had fallen asleep. Gathering about him they listened a few moments to his breathings, then stole on tiptoe across the sands and entered the sphere. Almost immediately that vehicle began slowly to glide away.

Within the Sphere

DAVIDSON's skin prickled; his chivalry had not been required. Evidently these maidens would have appreciated the help of Bailee and Hal-Al to aid them in escaping the giant. Or at least, if they had not been the latter's prisoners, they were merry madcaps and had seized the first opportunity for adventure. They could not have thought the giant sick or injured, and be going to procure help, or they would scarcely have tiptoed so cautiously back to the sphere.

The little corporal sighed: these girls would roll away across the scarlet carpet of velvet grass like lovely figures in a dream, and he would be left alone with his companions, to be all but mobbed by them for a spoil-sport, when they should awaken from their sleep. For they would know that their sleep had fallen upon them by his hands, and by no other means, and he would not attempt to deceive them, since they were now man to man in the enemy's land, and the word of each must be his bond.

Again the unexpected happened. The sphere glided slowly along till it came to where Hal-Al and Bailee were almost locked in one another's manly arms in slumber, when it stopped, the door was opened and two maidens came out, shortly followed by three others. Amongst them they lifted the two sleepers and bore them separately into the sphere. While they were taking Hal-Al inside, Davidson covered half the distance to the scene, and the remaining distance while they were carrying Bailee within. He had decided to cast his lot with his companions; they could die together or make love together. If it should be neither death nor love, at least they would not be separated on this strange planet.

Though it was bright day to Davidson, the girls seemed unaware of his approach till he was almost upon them, which imperfection of sight he could not account for till later.

When they saw him they fled into the sphere, but the boldest remained standing in the doorway. He made signs to be taken within and drew closer to the open door. Should they refuse him admission he proposed to make a forced attempt, to join his unconscious friends. As he drew nearer, smiling, they evidently saw that he was not a man-monster but bore features similar to those of the two younger men that they had just taken into the sphere.

To his delight, they now came forward and fluttered about him, conversing amongst themselves in a language like soft music and the cooing of doves, and touching his person with their slender fingers as though better to estimate him.

Step by step he approached nearer to the sphere till he had insinuated himself into that gliding car. They followed and he found himself in a kind of false twilight cast by a glass-like globe overhead, which gave out darkness, as a light on earth gives out brightness. A few feet away he saw Bailee and Hal-Al lying on the floor; then one of the girls took him by the hand and led him to a seat on a wide low couch. Immediately they lifted the two sleeping men and deposited them at full length beside him, placing a cushion under each of their heads.

Two of the girls now ascended a stair close beside him and in a few moments he was aware that the sphere was moving, as a dim cineograph of trees, grass and water was thrown on the wall before him, evidently a reflection of the route they were traversing. He glanced upwards and saw an irregular ceiling about ten feet above, which would allow for another room or upper deck within the sphere, and still permit of a substantial thickness to the walls.

The faint cineograph soon registered by its swifter changes that the sphere was moving faster, and though this reflection was somewhat vague and blurred to Davidson he judged that it was quite clear to the others, since they were accustomed to viewing such an effect. Besides, Davidson had suddenly divined that the twilight cast over the scene was no doubt a clear brilliancy to these girls, who saw by *darkness*, not by *light*, or required a tempered light, like the owls of earth.

HE let his eyes range along the circular wall, at a height about level with the chins of the girls, who were of very similar stature, and suddenly saw a penciling of light. He arose and going to this light put back a delicate but opaque curtain of some unfamiliar fabric and discovered a transparent, circular window of a substance similar to glass, but with a velvety touch. Through this he could see the outside world practically as clearly as if he stood without the sphere, and observed that they were moving over a stretch of rough ground but without noticeable vibration.

Looking closer he was assured that the crystal before him was double and between was a clear liquid. He concluded that the sphere was a ball within a ball, separated by a jacket of some limpid liquid which served the purpose of taking up all vibration; and no doubt this was the stuff turning bluish as it reached the outer air which had squirted from those spheres that he had pierced with projectiles from his automatic and cyclo-gun.

He let the curtain drop and turned to the five

girls who were gathered close about him conversing with one another in their soft, cooing, musical language, and no doubt discussing him. He now pointed upwards and crossed to the stairs that he had seen the two absent girls ascend. It was evident that these were piloting the sphere and it was vitally important that he should learn as quickly as possible the rudiments of that art. They treated him as a guest rather than a prisoner and freely allowed him to ascend the stairs into the false twilight above, accompanying him and cooing about him like beautiful doves.

On the upper floor a girl was seated at a little table, the top of which was composed of sixteen differently colored squares, each about an inch in diameter. These squares were individually depressible like piano keys, but all on the same level. This was evidently the switch or pilot-board. A second girl was looking over the shoulder of the first, perhaps taking lessons of her. Directly above and before this pilot board was an observatory window, through which Davidson could clearly see the country without which the sphere was traversing.

He now noted that the pilot lightly touched the fourth key on the first row on the pilotboard and the sphere veered to the right, avoiding a group of trees ahead. Caressing her cheek, as he might the wing of a bird to soothe its alarm, he touched the same key himself. Again the sphere turned slightly to the right and continued ahead.

He now touched the last key on the bottom row, whereupon the sphere came to an almost instant stop without perceptible vibration. At this he was highly gratified and throwing out his arms sought by this action to make the pilot understand that he wished the sphere to proceed. She evidently caught his meaning for she touched the first key on the last row and the sphere went ahead.

The flint had struck and lighted intelligence between the little corporal and the pilot, and though the other girls cooed and fluttered about him, shaking his resolution to its foundation with their great violet eyes and scarlet rose-bud mouths, he remained at his post and got the rudiments of the pilot-board. The latter proved to be both simple and complex. Each key had its single purpose, as to start, stop, turn to left, right, etc., but by pressing two or more keys at once a combination was formed by which the sphere was capable of doing certain things which could not be achieved by the pressing of a single key.

Once they came to a wide gorge with very steep banks, and the pilot made a combination that carried the sphere into the gorge, through the rushing water, and safely up on the opposite shore.

It became evident to Davidson that the sphere did not proceed by any power of revolving wheel, fan or ball, within or about itself, but glided along, lightly touching the ground, driven by some form of repulsion or attraction arising from a distant object or field such as a power plant or magnetic or repulsion pole, or two neighboring planets, one attracting and one repelling.

Besides their amazing large eyes and very small scarlet mouths, he now discovered another distinction between these lovely girls and the maidens of the earth. Their attire, delicate and sheer as it was, had concealed this particular difference till one of the girls innocently slipped her dress from her shoulders and bosom and he noted that beneath her arms, slightly connecting the under part of the arms to the torso, was a tenuous fleshy membrane or web, as if in some remote antiquity this race had been winged. But the wings had evoluted into human arms, leaving a slight membrane hinting of their airy origin, yet in no way discounting the charms or hindering the free, graceful motion of those arms.

But shortly followed a discovery which for a time Davidson hesitated to accept, it placed the whole situation in such a different and alarming light. Yet accept it he must, for the evidence was too plain to be dismissed as a wild fancy of his own, caused by drinking water of that clear sea, or partaking of some wild game whose flesh had heated his blood with fever. These lovely, voluptuous maidens with their great violet eyes, rosebud mouths, and the seraphic hint of wings on their fragrant persons, were more perilous than any danger he had faced since landing on the scarlet planet. He and his two helpless, sleeping companions were shut fast in the great gliding sphere with seven harpies *lusting for warm blood to drink!*

CHAPTER VI

Vampires!

THE little corporal passed two hours standing beside the girl at the pilot-board, memorizing the keys and fitting himself to guide the sphere under ordinary conditions, but he did not succeed in learning the principle by which the sphere was propelled. However he was still of the opinion that the whole scheme was a matter of magnetism or repulsion, or both, and the sphere glided and turned and veered between magnetic or repulsive fields.

Then the maidens grew impatient for some reason and drew him down to the lower floor, where they seated him on a couch and brought him food and drink. He ate heartily, for the viands and drink were delicious, for as yet no suspicion of the true nature of these lovely creatures had entered his mind.

As he ate they fluttered about him, playing on softly-tuned musical instruments accompanied by their own sweeter, softer voices. Finally he closed his eyes from the sheer physical pleasure of the luxurious couch, delicious food, soothing sounds, and warm arms about him, and, unaware, slid into slumber. All this time the sphere was gliding without vibration across a rolling land carpeted with warm scarlet grass.

Suddenly he awoke in great uneasiness, though the cause of his uneasiness he could not for a time ascertain. He had been conscious in his sleep of a dragging as at his heart, and had a vague recollection of having dreamed that he was a faun-

faced fountain in a dim park, with water flowing from his heart as scarlet as blood, and a troop of lovely maidens with wide violet eyes came and fluttered about him, and, putting up her rosebud mouth, each maiden drank in turn of the scarlet water as it flowed from his heart.

The room was now lighted with a mellow but clear light from a globe overhead and, as he stirred and sat up, he was aware of something warm and soft untwining from about his person and slipping away behind him. He fancied it was but some dream-idea melting into nothingness, and turned heavily, when he saw one of the girls stealing from his couch. Still sleep-sodden he turned towards Hal-Al and Bailee who were lying on another couch but a few feet away and on either side of each of them he saw two girls lying with their faces buried against the right and left arms of his companions.

He arose and yawned and stretched, with the uneasiness still oppressing him, when immediately there was a murmur as of alarm, and the girls lying beside his still unconscious friends arose and slipped away from them. Then the clear mellow light overhead was dimmed into the twilight in which he had fallen asleep, and shortly five of the maidens gathered about him and began to sing and play softly in his heavy ears.

The twilight in the sphere was not so obscure but that he noted the bright scarlet of their mouths for they were almost in his arms, they pressed so near and he was now aware that each licked her lips in the pauses of singing. The pulse of his left wrist stung him and he rubbed it a few times, then gave it no further attention, as he had accustomed himself to disobey the small dictates of the flesh lest they should become magnified with attention and tyrannize too much over his spirit.

He returned to the pilot-board above stairs and refreshed his memory of the keys, and ran the sphere for some distance. The light here being much stronger, coming through the observatory window before him, he noted a singular marking on his left wrist. It looked like the indenture of the teeth of some little animal. A mouse had bit him, or a weasel, or—he suddenly sickened at the thought—a woman!

A soft pink arm fluttered over his shoulder and touched one of the keys of the pilot-board, and the sphere veered off just in time to save its crashing into a noble tree. He got the reins of his reason and saved himself from plunging like a frightened horse. He had grasped the truth! The mark on his wrist was the indentation of one of these rosebud mouths!

THERE had been two of the harpies clinging to the wrists of each of his unconscious companions, and that clear mellow light in the room when he had awakened had been artificial darkness to their great violet eyes. They saw by darkness or dimness and not light, and of course the harpies had believed it was darkness also to his eyes and he could not see them in that dark, sucking his blood and the blood of his companions.

He decided his next duty was to learn how to open the door of the sphere, so that he could escape at the first opportunity, after his friends had awakened. But it would be quite awhile before Hal-Al and Bailee could recover from the effects of the sleeping-pellets that he had shot into their legs, and meantime he must not sleep again nor leave the two men alone.

Naturally a reaction followed and for a while Davidson almost persuaded himself that he was feverish to credit this odious suspicion of the lovely creatures about him. But after an examination of the wrists of both Hal-Al and Bailee carried on covertly under the guise that he was trying to arouse them, he was satisfied that the situation was not a phantasy due to fever in his blood.

What a planet he was lost upon! Men with pig-serpent-heads—for surely these fighting mammals he had met with could not have been of the female sex—and women of utter loveliness who luxuriated on warm human blood! The muddy Amazon of animalism had carried far into this sea of humanity.

It was not long before he suspected that the girls knew he was aware of their bat nature, whereupon he began to wonder if they were not consciously holding him their prisoner. He examined his little cocaine Metzer, as well as those of his friends, and found all the shells empty. He would not be able to shoot the girls to sleep. His automatic was fully loaded, but it was out of the question to turn a deadly weapon on these lovely images of the human form. He could not slay them, he could not strike them; he could but turn and run from them when the opportunity should offer. Or make them his prisoners without violence, then escape.

If Hal-Al and Bailee had been awake, he was confident that the three of them could quickly subdue the seven girls but, alone, he hesitated to act for fear that at a touch of a secret key they would turn some ray upon him that would paralyze him, even destroy him.

He began a tour of the sphere, smilingly examining every object and endeavouring to make them understand that he wished to know its purpose. They fluttered about him, conversing in their soft, melodious language, but very rarely did intelligence strike fire between them. Finally he came to the door, or what he took to be the door, by which he had entered the sphere, but with many murmurs they drew him away from the spot and would not permit him to return. Did they fear that he might fall from the moving sphere and be injured, or was he being kept a prisoner?

An hour later the sphere approached a bright stream of water, where it was brought to a stop, and watching covertly he observed one of the girls turn a kind of lever half around which threw the door wide open. Five of them now led him from the sphere and danced about him on the banks of the stream, and threw handfuls of sparkling water over him.

He was greatly refreshed by this diversion and the feeling that he was not their prisoner, till the unpleasant thought came that they were but doing this to revive him and cool his blood, that his

pulses would be sweeter to their mouths the next time he slept.

He now decided to test the length of his tether, so began running about along the shore, as if sporting like the others, when suddenly he turned and ran a little ways towards a group of trees down stream. He had gone scarcely thirty meters when all the strength went from his knees and he fell on the purple sands. But almost immediately his strength returned as mysteriously as it had left him, and he arose and went back.

Evidently the two girls remaining within the sphere had played the invisible paralyzant ray on his limbs, and he now fully realized that he was a prisoner, with a leash no longer than these harpies choose to allow him. He was but a two-legged animal kept to be drained alive of his blood.

Escape!

HE assumed innocence of their cunning and began to sport with them again, and freely accompanied them back into the sphere when they took his hand to lead him within. Caution advised him to delay until his two friends had recovered from their forced sleep, when, amongst them, they should be able to put the pilot-board of the sphere out of commission, then make a dash for liberty, with some assurance of success.

Sometime later both sleeping men stirred and shortly came to consciousness within a few minutes of one another. Davidson sat beside them and in a few choice words explained the situation. They had the evidence of the marks of teeth on their own wrists and a certain weakness of body due to the loss of blood.

Bailee stared at the five lovely harpies gathered about the couch where he was seated with Hal-Al, then his eyes rolled with disgust towards his companions.

"The opera is all over before it's begun!" he said.

"The same!" nodded Hal-Al.

"The same!" repeated Davidson.

Bailee put out his hand. "Shake, corporal! You didn't chuck us over while we were asleep and run off with the girls, and you haven't deserted us since you found them out."

"I had no chance," replied Davidson curtly.

"You wouldn't have deserted us, if you'd had a chance and a half!" sighed Hal-Al.

"No, you wouldn't have," sighed Bailee. "You're a gentleman! But say, corporal, we'll help you desert us."

"We will," nodded Hal-Al.

Davidson laughed sardonically at them.

"Seven beautiful bats in a big ball!" groaned Hal-Al.

"Seven lovely leeches in a big bottle!" groaned Bailee.

"We'll have to uncork the bottle and run for it," said the little corporal. "We can't be rough with ladies."

"It's awful!" groaned Bailee.

"It's hell!" groaned Hal-Al.

"It's up to you," said Davidson.

"Two more above deck?" demanded Bailee.

"Two more!"

"As handsome as these?"

"Handsomer!"

"You're plain spoken, corporal!" said Bailee.

"Damn plain!" growled Hal-Al.

"You're men, and in some ways better men than myself," replied the little corporal. "You know what you want better than I know what you want, and you know what price you are willing to pay for it, and after all it's all in the price, with men. If you hang around this cage and make love to these harpies, you'll last about a week, or maybe two.

"For myself I don't propose to use any violence towards these beauties, for they look too much like humanity, but at the first good chance I intend to make a break for the big clean outdoors. I'll be glad to have you join me in the break, but that's up to you. What's the verdict?"

The two younger men regarded one another a moment and Davidson thought he saw the ghost of a wink pass between them.

Bailee reached out his hand. "Shake on it, corporal! We'll join you in the break for liberty."

Hal-Al reached out his hand. "That we will! The ladies will keep."

THE little corporal was not wholly convinced. He suspected that they would help him get clear of the sphere, so that he would not have the blood sucked from his veins every time he fell asleep, then they would return to these girls and take a chance together, without involving him.

"After we are clear of them we had better keep going," he advised. "We may run into a country where the girls are girls and not bats."

"It's a big planet," nodded Hal-Al, non-committingly.

"It is," nodded Bailee.

Davidson wished to act at once, before the discretion of his friends should be dissipated by the glowing beauty of the seven maidens. "I'll stop the sphere, then we'll hustle all the girls down here where they can't get at the pilot-board, and then we'll open the door, take them a little ways with us, leave them and run for it. Before they can get back to the sphere and turn a ray on us we should be out of sight. Of course we can't throw them out of the sphere and take it for ourselves, as they might perish if left without it."

"But can you stop the sphere?" demanded Hal-Al.

"I can do that much—and open the door."

Hal-Al set his jaw and arose a bit unsteadily. "Commence, corporal. And hurry!"

The latter sprang upstairs, for his eye had become somewhat accustomed to the false twilight in the sphere, and he was able to move quickly. Going to the pilot-board he pressed the last square on the last row and the sphere came to an almost instant stop. Then he swept the two girls at the board into his arms and bore them downstairs.

"Quick!" he cried, blocking the stairs, so that none of the girls below could get by him. "Grab all of them and hold on!"

This proved an easy task, for the two younger

men were already engaged at embracing the five girls.

"Ready!" said Hal-Al.

"Ready!" grinned Bailee.

Their plan had been so quickly executed that Davidson got to the door and succeeded in throwing it open before the seven girls seemed actually to realize the full intentions of the men. Then they fought.

The little corporal heard a howl from Bailee, followed by a grunt from Hal-Al, then he gasped with sudden pain as two rosebud mouths sank their teeth into his wrists. In another moment Hal-Al was outside on the scarlet grass with three of the girls in his arms, each with her teeth sunk into his flesh. Bailee quickly followed with two of the girls, while Davidson struggled behind with the remaining two.

Not a sound had come from any of the harpies, for each had sunk her teeth into the flesh of a man and was sucking his blood, either in rage or while the opportunity offered.

"Run—straight ahead!" directed Davidson. Not a hundred meters away was the margin of a wood, and the trees seemed to offer the best means of concealment.

Bailee preceded, his exclamations of pain mingling with his grunts of delight at the situation. Hal-Al followed silently, struggling with his greater burden. The little corporal brought up the rear, frequently gasping with pain, for the two vampires that he held had got the tenderest portion of his wrists between their teeth. But he would not let either of them go, for though they were women and lovely beyond belief, they were dangerous as fanged serpents. If but one of them should escape and get back to the sphere and swing the paralyzant ray in their direction he and his companions were lost.

Davidson feared his two friends even more than their captives. When they should come to the wood and be safe from the treachery of the sphere and its dangerous rays, would they not decide to dally with these lovely girls till the latter had betrayed them to recapture, or worse?

But they never reached the wood. They were about thirty meters distant, struggling forward with their painful, detaining burdens, when from among the trees came a hundred or more of just such lovely creatures as their captives, and swept towards them like a wave from an unholy flood of women.

CHAPTER VII

Pursuit

THE three men gasped and halted at sight of the flood of women bearing down upon them.

"Shake the girls off and get back to the sphere!" commanded Davidson. "If the crowd gets us we'll become bloodless skeletons!"

"Wow!" roared Hal-Al, shaking the three clinging girls from his giant form and turning and running for the sphere, like a big white horse pursued by a smother of bats.

Bailee shook himself free and followed, and tearing himself from the two rosebud mouths at his wrists, Davidson brought up the unchivalrous but discreet rear. They reached the sphere almost abreast and plunged in. The little corporal pulled down the lever that locked the door, then fairly hurling himself upstairs to the pilot-board pressed the key that set the sphere into motion.

Hal-Al and Bailee stumbled upstairs and stared through the forward observatory window. "Hold on!" cried the former. "We're safe enough now —let's apologize!"

Davidson swung the sphere to the right to avoid crashing into a score of girls close in pursuit.

"Besides, we might let two or three in—to do the washing," suggested Bailee.

The little corporal disregarded their suggestions, knowing their ulterior motives. Feeling about as much of a man as a rat in a trap beset by a hundred Persian kittens, he headed the sphere for the open country.

"This isn't the earth," he rasped. "And these aren't women. They're a swarm of bats! Get that into your heads before you get all the blood sucked out of you."

Hal-Al groaned. "Right you are! We'd last about three minutes out there!"

Bailee wiped away the blood oozing from both of his wrists. "It isn't worth it, Hal! Besides, you don't believe we could last three whole minutes, do you?"

"Do you see any other spheres?" demanded Davidson.

"Not a one."

"Then we're safe for the time being, but if they come after us in one of these machines they may recapture us yet, for I don't know how to get any more speed than we are making and that can't be thirty miles an hour. They may be able to make a hundred!"

"It's the first time I ever run from girls," grinned Bailee, apologetically. "But I was thinking of you, corporal, and not of myself. I'd hate to see you drunk alive, like a bottle of refreshment."

"I'll swallow that bitter pill, if it will do your pride any good," nodded Davidson. "There's a window at the rear, and one at each side: suppose you look about a bit and apologize less for not making an ass of yourself by staying outside."

"They've all gone back into the woods," informed Hal-Al shortly, from his post at the rear.

"Not a soul in sight," said Bailee, from his post at the right. "What a world! what a world! Oh, to see one of their women, if their bats are handsome as angels!"

A few moments later a growl came from Hal-Al. "They're coming from the woods—a dozen big pink spheres, and some little dirty ones!" He drew his automatic and regarded it. "But how the devil am I to shoot at a lady!"

BAILEE joined his friend and stared at the oncoming spheres. "They're running about even with us," he informed. "Jam all the keys and see what happens."

"This is no time to experiment," replied the little corporal. "We'll abandon the sphere and

take to the trees till these vampires pass by. They'll hardly see us up a tree, but perhaps they can see this sphere a mile in their dark."

"Let's hope there are some of those pig-headed fellows with them," sighed Bailee. "I can't strike a lady and retain my poise and enthusiasm!"

"Same here!" growled Hal-Al.

"We'll probably get our bellyful this time!" Davidson ran the sphere around a noble group of great, flaming scarlet trees, where he brought it to a stop. "Now, men, pile out and make for the thickest timber where they can't bring their machines. They mayn't have any portable weapons but their hands and teeth."

They abandoned the sphere, which at best might prove but a gliding trap, and raced into the woods. Suddenly Bailee stopped and lying down began to yell with laughter.

"Chased by a hundred beautiful girls, and running for our lives!" he gasped.

"Get up!" commanded the little corporal in alarm. "They are probably close behind and will drink you like a cup of water."

Bailee arose and hurried on, shaking with laughter at the humor of the situation. Faint sounds reached them, that grew more distinct, like many light feet running over the leaves. Then these sounds turned off and died away, and the older man drew a breath of relief. There had been something harrowing to him in these sounds, like the running of a pack of weasels, hurrying to strip the flesh from his bones.

They came at last to a kind of wood within the woods, where the trees were different from any they had before noticed. Tall and exceedingly graceful, with leaves as varied and delicate as the frost crystals of the earth. Here they sat down and rested and smoked, and talked the situation over in subdued voices, for the exquisite beauty of the trees modulated them to a quieter if not a finer mood.

They decided to make an attempt to return to the season and follow it along in the hope that they might come again on the camp where they had left their radiocycles, meantime keeping a watch for the little hydro-terra plane circling through the skies. If they could recover either the radiocycles or the plane they would be immeasurably better off than they then were.

They allowed for the fact that they had been traveling a good part of the time since they had left camp, but the sphere had moved rather slowly, and, if it had proceeded in the right direction —and there was a very reasonable chance it had— they would still be within the three hundred-mile circle that was being swung by the H-T plane. Davidson had his binoculars with him, which could cover this distance for sighting an object as large as the plane, and which would greatly aid them in locating the pilotless machine.

Each man had his automatic and a small supply of shells, his clothing and shoes, but no cap, as these had been lost sometime before. They had not the simplest remedy for a fever or chill, or illness of any nature; and since the excitement was past both of the younger men showed a bit to the weather from having been drained of considerable blood by the harpies. The little corporal had got off easier, perhaps because he had not been drugged and so had alarmed the vampires with restlessness during his sleep.

THEY proceeded leisurely but steadily and shortly coming to a stream continued to follow its course downward, as no doubt it emptied into the sea, or was a tributary of a larger stream that did. At Davidson's advice his companions used reasonable caution about exposing themselves on the open stretches, and he noted that they did not seem particularly eager to meet with more of the harpies. For it had sunk into their minds that though they were fighting men they were no match for a swarm of these beautiful bats.

On the third shift that the little corporal was awake (they took turns, two of them sleeping eight hours with the third watching, then the latter sleeping and one of the former watching and the other hunting, then the three of them marching) Davidson was overjoyed to discover the little H-T plane flying low to his right, scarcely, he judged, five miles distant. He climbed a tree and got the best line he could on the plane's flight, and on their next march they suddenly came on the shore of the sea and, following it northward, came on their late camp.

All of their game, which they had hung up for the sun to dry, was gone, but the two radiocycles remained as they had been left. They concluded that the camp had been visited by marauding animals but scarcely by humans or super-intellectual mammals.

As a measure of caution they removed their camp some miles down the water, and here divided their time between getting a supply of game to dry—while they waited for the H-T plane to drop somewhere along its circuit from exhaustion of fuel—and in building a fair-sized raft of branches lashed with reeds and tough vines. They might yet be compelled to take to the water, to escape some enemy, or to recover the plane.

The hours passed, they could not say days, for it was always light, and they soon were in perfect physical condition. The air and water were very invigorating, and they had plenty of fresh game and fruit. They had found that the innumerable pods hanging on many of the trees about their camp were not only safe eating, but also as tasty as the finer fruits of the earth.

When active work failed, the two younger men quickly drew restless, as all robust men not trained to creative thought are apt to become when physically idle. Thereupon Davidson proposed that they move on, keeping within and along the circle swung by the pilotless plane. They could not anticipate just where the machine would eventually fall and so considered that they might as well be at one point of that circle as another. Hal-Al and Bailee readily fell in with the little corporal's proposal, and after lashing the raft as securely as possible, for they might yet have need to return and make use of it, they set out with the two radiocycles and a supply of dried game.

Holding their course true by the plane which

passed over their heads every twenty hours, they kept on till, coming from the obscurity of a wood, they saw rising before them in the near distance a plateau, which, though somewhat narrow, was sufficiently high for the hydro-terra plane to touch, or almost touch, if the flight of the plane was across this table-land.

"If the plane crosses yonder hill, perhaps we can board it!" exclaimed Davidson.

"Our luck's turning," said Hal-Al. "Like a tide coming in again."

"It's all tides!" nodded Bailee. "And men are but fishes in the tides of chance."

In another moment the three men gave a shout of surprise and delight. The little H-T scout-plane shot into view, coming from the plateau, which it must have grazed in its flight, or perhaps it had run for some distance on the surface of the ground. Then again they shouted for now, plainly visible, leaning over the left side of the plane, was seen one of those lovely human-like vampire girls!

CHAPTER VIII

Dead or Alive?

BAILEE was the first to speak. "She'll be back in twenty hours! Now watch me use my head instead of my heels."

"You'll have to use both head and heels," commented Davidson. "You'll need to do some tall running to board the plane without getting killed, even if it does graze the ground."

"I can board it from one of the radiocycles," said Hal-Al. "As easy as kissing Bailee's sweetheart!"

"Good!" exclaimed Davidson. "I had forgotten the radiocycles."

"We'll toss for it," proposed Bailee. He picked up a stone, flat on one side and round on the other. "What will you have—flat or round?"

"Wait till I try out the principle!" Hal-Al took the stone and proceeded to toss it several times to learn the principle of its fall.

Bailee grinned. "We'll take a stone flat on both sides. When it comes to but one girl between two of us—I beg your pardon, corporal, I should have said three of us!—we'll trust to no principle, but just to luck."

"Hold on!" protested Davidson. "The plane is more important than the girl. We should be able to swing aboard it the first time it comes around again, for it appears that this girl had got aboard, and the three of us surely should be able to accomplish as much as a mere girl. Yet it is possible that the pig-serpent chap that we captured never got himself free of his bonds, but this girl chanced along while we were off hunting and found him tied to the plane and freed him, and she has been aboard the plane ever since he was shot and fell off."

"My God! She'll be dead of thirst!" cried Bailee.

Hal-Al fairly roared. "We've got to stop that plane the next time it comes around and get the girl off, if it kills all of us!"

Bailee groaned and sat down. "She's dead by now! She's dead of thirst and tumbled over against the rail. It won't be a man she wants, but a few shovels of sod on her sweet face!"

"Hell!" groaned Hal-Al.

"I think she's alive and just boarded the plane up on the plateau," said Davidson. "I'm positive she's alive, for if she had been on the plane long enough to perish from thirst she would have tried the key-board before this and swung the plane off its circuit."

The two younger men were cheered at these words. "I've got my own opinion," said Hal-Al. "Only I don't know just what it is yet. Anyway, we've got to stop that plane the next time it comes around, if it staves in the ribs of all three of us. Remember, she's a girl if she is a vampire!"

The little corporal now thought of the binoculars, which had wholly escaped the minds of all three men in their excitement, and whipping them out directed them towards the plane. But Hal-Al seized them from his hands and studied the H-T. Then, without a word, he passed the glasses to Bailee and turned away to one of the radiocycles.

The latter studied the plane a few moments, then returned the binoculars to Davidson. "See what you can see, corporal. She may be but sleeping!"

The older man studied the motionless human form, partly visible on the left side of the H-T, slightly forward from the center. There seemed more of death than sleep about the girlish figure. He reflected now that this was the first time that he had been able to see the plane from its left, as always before he had been within the circle swung by the hydro-terra and consequently had viewed it from its right.

HE returned the glasses to his pocket. "We'll stop the plane the next time it makes the circuit. While there's doubt there's hope."

Bailee sighed. "If she's alive I'll kiss her! If she's dead I'll bury her!"

"I'll bury her myself!" growled Hal-Al. "She's mine: I killed her!" The others thought the situation had momentarily upset his reason, but he continued. "She was in the plane with that pig-headed fellow who escaped us, and I didn't know it, and my shot clipped him and got her. Else she would have fooled with the key-board before this."

"You're a fool!" said Bailee softly. "She just jumped the plane up there on the level a few minutes ago, where it hit the grass and brush and slowed up a bit. She's resting after her jump."

"You lie!" retorted Hal-Al. "And I don't need your lie! I can lie better myself! Remember I killed her and she's mine!"

"You can have her," replied Bailee. "If she's dead."

"She's mine!" repeated Hal-Al solemnly. "I'll call her Nina and bury her under the bright grass."

They pressed on and once the others heard Hal-Al groan to himself: "God Almighty, I've killed a girl!"

Davidson feared he had, and her dead body had been borne aloft through the heavens for many, many hours, with no winged creatures to attack or destroy it. But if Hal-Al had killed this girl at the time of shooting at the pig-serpent headed fellow he had done so wholly unintentionally and perhaps she had died instantly. There had been neither suffering nor guilt.

Davidson considered the uniqueness of the situation. This dead girl of a race that perhaps had never learned to ascend even a moment into the air—that perhaps had never seen a flying creature—now circling about through the heavens hour after hour in the bright sunlight!

They recalled where they had first seen the plane appear and, reaching the plateau, continued in that direction. The little corporal advised his companions to advance cautiously as the presence of the girl on the plane might signify that there were other such girls on the plateau seeking to accomplish the same daring act of boarding the H-T, if such had been the case with the girl aboard.

"Look here, corporal," suggested Hal-Al, turning to the latter. "We'd better string out in a line, one about two or three miles ahead, one half way between, and one here. In this way we'll have three chances of boarding the plane, to only one chance if we stay together. For she mayn't take the ground where we happen to be bunched, but some distance ahead or behind. The two men ahead can each have a radiocycle and speed back to the end man and join him, if there's nothing doing ahead."

Bailee grinned. "That suggestion is better than the suggestor. I'll go on ahead, with Hal in the middle, and you, corporal, will be the tight little knot at the end of this long string of hope."

"You will—last Thursday!" retorted Hal-Al. "I'm the one who will go ahead! Didn't I shoot the girl, and shouldn't I see her first, to apologize?"

"You won't make love to her till she has a look at me?" demanded Bailee.

Hal-Al agreed and they shook hands on the agreement, when Bailee grinned. "Maybe the corporal wants to be first."

Davidson smiled and consented to give way to the others and be the last man to attempt to board the plane, on condition that he should retain the binoculars, and that they wouldn't fight over the girl, if she was alive, nor make love to her until she had seen him also.

"That's fair enough!" nodded Hal-Al. "We'll leave it to the girl."

"It's all luck with women, anyway," said Bailee. "But I'm a damn lucky fellow!"

(Illustrated by Paul)

Within the great shed, reclining tier on tier, lay many hundreds of young women, all seemingly asleep.

A Dangerous Chance

As it would be about twenty hours before the plane could reappear, they decided to look the plateau over. They found it to be about five miles square, with few trees, and those rather low and of such fragile texture that they scarcely bore climbing. The whole surface of the plateau was covered with a high scarlet grass, as soft and smooth as fine fur, and for the first time they were positive that the vegetation of the planet, or at least that hemisphere, was kept alive and fresh not by rain but by a slight and continual dew.

"No clouds, no birds, no airships!" considered Davidson. "Nothing to look upwards to but the sun, and that perhaps almost invisible to this strange race because it sheds darkness to them instead of light or is too bright for them to look upward at. If we can but recover the plane we probably will be able to pass over the most populous centers and no eye be lifted to observe us."

Hal-Al carefully put out his pipe to save the unconsumed tobacco, then after setting the alarm on his wrist watch so that the alarm needles would jab his wrist in three hours and awake him, he stretched himself on the grass beside his radiocycle. "I'll snooze a bit," he said. "Then take my position at the further end of the plateau."

"I'll beat you to snooze junction," grinned Bailee, making himself ready for a nap. "Sleep is a waste of time, but what do I care for time where there is no girl to make love to, or music to hear!"

Davidson privately slipped Hal-Al the binoculars before the latter fell asleep, advising him to say nothing of the matter to Bailee as it might lead to friction. Since Hal-Al would have the first hazard at boarding the plane it was Davidson's opinion that he should have every aid to make that hazard a success.

The little corporal remained awake while the others slept, and passed the time in looking over the radiocycles to be assured that they were in perfect order. On them they were chiefly dependent for pursuit of the plane, and on the plane dependent for their greater liberty and perhaps their lives, as only in the air would they be reasonably free of the gliding spheres with their dangerous rays.

Hal-Al awoke from the jab of the alarm needles of his wristwatch and rode away while Bailee was still snoring, but the latter awoke shortly with a grunt as the alarm needles jabbed his own wrist, and rode off on the other radiocycle to position himself half across the plateau. Davidson remained where they had stocked their small supply of dried game. Though he had good eyesight he would not be able to see the plane approaching at any considerable distance, unless it approached well above the grass, in which case it would be very difficult to board. He had one trick up his sleeve which he had not discovered to his companions, and he believed it might yet prove the winning ace.

For several years he had worn a Whing belt, which consisted of ten meters of specially braided and treated silk cable one-eighth inch thick, the whole coiled within a pliable silk envelope or tubing and worn as a belt to support the trousers. This cord was of extraordinary strength and, being extremely flexible and little inclined to snarling, had got many a man out of a tight situation. He had retained the cord—being lighter than his companions and more agile in mounting such a medium—and now drawing it from its tubing he selected a suitable stone, and, tying it to one end of the cord, made a loop at the other end for his hand. Then he practiced at swinging the cord over his head and casting it about the trunk of a small tree.

Should the plane pass within seven meters overhead he would have three meters of the silken cable to wrap around some stay or rail on the machine, and seven meters to reach him below and supply the medium by which to ascend to the moving plane. By placing himself in the path of the approaching hydra-terra, with the cord swinging over his head, with a little good fortune he believed he should be able to wind the weighted end of the cable about some part of the plane, and haul himself aboard.

THIS attempt might prove hazardous on his part, but not excessively so, as for a long time the plane had been maintaining the moderate speed of fifteen miles an hour, and could reasonably be depended upon not to exceed that rate. While if he found his task beyond him, he could slide to the end of the cord and drop off.

Suddenly he saw the H-T approaching at quite a distance. He judged it was flying at a height of not over five meters, and shortly he made out Bailee and Hal-Al racing beneath it on their radiocycles. He could see that neither would be able to clamber aboard, even by one standing on the other's shoulders on a moving radiocycle. Then the shrill of their horns reached his ears, followed by their own yells of excitement, or rage, at their helplessness.

The little corporal observed the plane pass just over a small tree, then above another tree some distance forward, and getting the line of its approach by these two objects, he took his position and began to swing the weighted cord about his head.

He wanted to shout to the others to keep clear of him, but he found his lungs fully engaged with his effort to keep the ten meters of cable swinging taut and high. He had knotted the lower end of the cord through the upper buttonhole of his coat, which he believed would be a sufficient grip to hold the cord momentarily when he should let go and while the weighted end wound itself about some portion of the plane. Then, should he not be able to sprint forward quickly enough to escape the sudden tightening of the silken cable, only the buttonhole of his coat would be torn away and he would not be dragged forward too violently, or his limbs or neck be endangered, as would be the case if the cord was attached to his arm or body. Besides, this would avoid the risk of the cable being broken from the burden of his whole weight being suddenly thrown upon it.

The two men on the radiocycles approached directly ahead of the plane and did not swerve, but Davidson was waiting a little to one side and tilting the cable at the point of their approach, so avoided collision with them. The plane ran its nose straight across the upper four meters of the cord, as the latter came around its swing almost at right angles to the hydro-terra.

Instantly the little corporal spurted forward beneath the plane and seized hold of the cord that for a moment he had let go of, just as the pull came on the buttonhole of his coat. Almost consecutively, it seemed, he was hanging to the cable beneath the plane, borne along with his feet

scarcely clearing the grass. *His attempt to snare the hydro-terra had proved successful!*

Hal-Al now swept Davidson up on the handle bars of his radiocycle and bore him along while the latter got a secure hold on the cord by taking a turn around his arm. Directing the other to ride free of him and keep free, unless he should slide back again, the little corporal threw all his spirit into the instant business and fairly hurled himself up the length of silken cable overhead, seized the rail and swung aboard the plane.

A shout of delight rose from the two men beneath, and Davidson was about to join in their jubilation, when he gasped and half threw up his hands. He was aware for the first time that the aft deck of the plane was alive with girl vampires.

CHAPTER IX

A Struggle Against Women

THE little corporal counted seven harpies aboard the pilotless H-T.

"Throw out a couple!" he heard Bailee shout. "Have a heart!"

Then he heard Hal-Al's roar. "Slide one down on a rope! I'll ride under her!"

He sprang to the pilot keys and sought to control the power and make a landing, but there was no response. The plane kept steadily on as if running in a fixed groove, and as he struggled with the keys to persuade their obedience to the mchanical discipline which was expected of them, he was suddenly borne to the deck by the whole assembly of girls leaping upon him.

He shouldered and elbowed his way from the embraces of the harpies, and, getting to the rail, shouted the situation to his comrades. But the plane had already passed beyond the plateau and above a wood, and Hal-Al and Bailee had been compelled to turn aside on their radiocycles and were too distant to overhear him.

Hopping up and down and swinging his arms about to protect himself from another attack by the girls, cutting such a figure as a man seeking to avoid a chill on a very cold day, he again sought to control the plane. But evidently something was jammed in its mechanical solar plexus, for he was unsuccessful.

Again the seven harpies attacked him in a body and sought to sink their dainty teeth into his veins, and he was tempted to blow the engine cold with his automatic and let the plane drop where it would. But he fought himself free and decided to consider the situation further before he should act too decisively.

When he should fail to return, even after several hours, he was confident that the others would not believe he had deserted them. They would conclude that he couldn't get the plane under control and so they would be waiting for its return on its accustomed circuit.

During the next five hours he divided his attention between the girls and the pilot keys. He succeeded in keeping the harpies off by dancing about and swinging his arms, and yelling at them, and by every method short of striking them. For it was a masculine imposaibility for the little corporal to strike these lovely images of the human form.

He studied the pilot keys without again touching them during these five hours, for he wished to learn the trouble without deviating the plane from its fixed circle of flight, which would bring it again above the plateau and the waiting men. The hydro-terra was flying over that sea by which he had first encamped when he at last found the difficulty. When Hal-Al had fired his automatic at their pig-serpent headed prisoner aboard the plane, the bullet had grazed a screw at the central point of contact beneath the pilot keys and the contact was broken.

He waited until the plane had come again over land, then got his contact by forcing back the screw. Keeping the same level and arc of flight, he speeded up. He shortly approached a plateau stretching before him on a level with the flight of the plane and thinking it likely that the girls had boarded the machine at this point, he slowed down and soon ran into a stretch of high, heavy grass that retarded the plane sufficiently to allow an active person to spring aboard with perfect safety.

IMMEDIATELY the girls began to jump from the plane, that was now running along the ground. Bringing it to a full stop he waited till all had abandoned him, then he decamped in haste. No doubt one of their gliding spheres was waiting them in the neighborhood—which was the reason they had quit him—and, if given the opportunity they would turn a paralyzant ray on his person.

Keeping the same arc of flight, but a higher level, he raced swiftly through the air and was soon over the plateau where he had boarded the plane some hours before. He turned the siren loose and shortly got an answering call of a radiocycle horn, and landing, was joined by his two companions.

He acquainted them with his adventure exactly as it had transpired. They searched the plane, even looking into the bolted supply chests, hoping that one girl had remained behind. But the harpies had come like a flock of birds and gone like a flock of birds, and the only consolation to be had by the two younger men was there were more of such girls not far away.

"I attempted to kiss one of them for both of you," smiled Davidson. "But she nearly bit a piece out of my neck."

Bailee grinned. "We'll have trouble robbing these bees of their honey! Yet there are as stinging women on the earth, if you but be too hasty about grabbing a kiss."

"And some that will drain you emptier of hope than these drain you of blood!" growled Hal-Al. "But I'm glad that girl we first saw was only playing possum or had fainted and was not dead! I'd hate to think to have it on my memory I'd killed a girl, even if she wasn't quite human!"

They put the two radiocycles and their small stock of dried game aboard the plane, then re-

crossed the valley over which they had lately come afoot, and after gathering a quantity of fruits and filling their drinking water tank, rose to about two hundred meters, and continued their flight. They proposed to come into a more populous region—if such was to be found—then conceal the plane to save fuel and as a powerful weapon to fall back upon. From here they would reconnoiter on foot and endeavor to get into some mental contact with the inhabitants, to learn news of the lost planet-plane. Or else satisfy themselves that they were permanently up against an entirely hopeless situation as far as returning to the earth was concerned.

"If we can't get back to Omaha, we'll build another Omaha here!" grinned Bailee.

"Another Chicago!" growled Hal-Al.

"We'll do what we can do," nodded Davidson. "Being but three men against an entire race we will more likely be crushed completely than run these myriads through our stamp and put our values on them. However, it will be a glorious enterprise to match our wits against these inhabitants and endeavor not only to obtain a secure living here but to fill this great scarlet planet with the language and laws of the old green earth."

"We are three Columbuses," said Hal-Al. "We discovered this planet, and to the discoverer belongs the natives discovered, if he can discover some way to make them believe it."

The younger men began to banter one another and the little corporal sped up the plane. He thought it best to get well away from that locality where both of his companions had been sorely tempted by the lovely harpies, and where their party might already be under general evil repute for having attacked three spheres. Besides, they would more likely hear rumors of the planet-plane many thousands of miles away than at this point, for if the man Jaquet had stolen the great planet-plane, no doubt he had removed it to some distant region in fear of pursuit.

At the Center!

AFTER several hours of continued flight they came all of a sudden into sharp cold. This cold grew so intense as they proceeded that soon they were compelled to resort to the store-chests aboard and each don a thermo-suit, to keep from actually freezing. Beneath them lay a desert—vast, level, without verdure of any sort, and no visible moving object, or even a stationary one. It was as near to nothingness as they had ever met without outside of celestial spaces.

"I feel like a gimlet boring a hole through a vacuum!" growled Hal-Al, after an hour of this monotonous flight.

"Oh for a land of girlization again!" groaned Bailee. "Even a country of bald-headed girls would be welcomer than this blankety blank."

Davidson gave a grunt of relief as he now distinguished a faint break on the horizon. "We'll head that way: it may prove more interesting than our own society."

They had proceded about fifteen minutes when they came on an infinity of buildings stretching before them. There is perhaps nothing that beggars words or passes description, though such expressions are often used for the sake of emphasis, for a good imagination with a fluency of words can leave the most marvelous facts far behind, and often does. But the little corporal felt that he did not possess the craft of words to sum up in a few clean strokes the motionless sea of level-roofed buildings over which they had come. Below were millions of long high sheds, all of some stone-like and evidently imperishable substance, ranged side by side and end to end, as if a population far exceeding the earth's population had erected, through long centuries, habitations or storehouses, or both.

"I'll wager a horse-chestnut to a chestnut horse," said Bailee, "that here's where this foxy race has laid up supplies to live on and never work any more at all. This cold desert is just one great ice box, and here's where they come for their supplies when they're all eaten out in their pink and purple marbles, not to mention their dirty little drab ones."

Below them were innumerable spheres, gliding in and out the massive sheds, and lending a certain support to Bailee's suggestion.

"Perhaps!" nodded Hal-Al. "Or perhaps they come here to sleep for a month or two at a time during their long night, and some are just turning it and some turning out, for it's night to them now."

"We had better keep on," advised Davidson. "The chances are we will have as far to go as we have come, to get out of this desert."

"Let's take a vote on landing," grinned Bailee. "Perhaps we can wake some sleeping beauty."

"I vote to land immediately," said Hal-Al.

"Is there any word more of the immediate than immediately?" demanded Bailee.

"Instantaneously," suggested Hal-Al. "Instantaneously is picking his teeth while immediately is only saying grace."

"Then I instantaneously vote to land instantaneously," said Bailee.

"Two to one carries," yielded Davidson. "Yet I vote against landing, as we may be captured and stripped, and we would perish very quickly in this intense cold without our thermo-suits."

"That's reasonable enough," granted Bailee. "But I'm not reasonable just now. Watch for a landing where there are no big marbles about and I'll drop off alone, and if I get stripped and frozen it will be the best and the worst left."

"I'll trust you to freeze among a bunch of girls," growled Hal-Al.

They made a landing in short order where there were no spheres visible within a radius of a mile, and Davidson joined his two companions on the ground. He had decided they would be stronger together than divided, and, besides, he was possessed with a great curiosity as to the nature of the countless buildings. Had they come upon the habitations of this entire race, confined to one vast district, with the remainder of the planet barren of dwellings? Or were these build-

ings the storehouses of the inhabitants, who had put aside sufficient food and materials of all kind to supply their needs for ages, and were now engaged wholly in gliding about in their spheres and enjoying themselves without labor, like the wealthy in the old times on the earth? The little corporal considered his last guess as the most reasonable of the two, since this pleasure-loving race would scarcely have built its universal city in a wilderness of cold. Yet such was just the place for storehouses for the preservation of food and staples.

They stole along to the end walls of one of the great sheds, and came to a high, wide entrance through which the largest sphere they had yet seen could have freely passed, and which allowed a full view within. Then the three men clutched at one another in astonishment.

CHAPTER X

The Eternal Tomb

WITHIN the great shed, reclining tier on tier—each tier sloping towards the broad center aisle, lay many hundreds of young women, all facing outwardly and all seemingly asleep.

"Oh the beauties!" panted Hal-Al. "I'll take that little one yonder by the bigger one, one—two—three—four, down the line on the second balcony. No, I'll take the third beyond her! No, I'll—"

"I'll take the rest!" panted Bailee. He tore his eyes from the scene and glanced over his shoulder for a clear right of way. "Let's grab two apiece—and make for the plane. We can come back for more later."

Then Davidson knew that something was wrong. This perfect silence was not sleep. He laid a firm hand on a shoulder of each of his companions. "Come away!" he commanded. "This is a vast tomb!"

But he could not get the two younger men back to the plane until they had wandered an hour through the scores of tombs and found no living girl. Then they got aboard and rose.

"Oh, you sweet, dead girls!" groaned Bailee. "You are no use any more but for tears!"

"All petrified to pure crystal," mused Davidson. "And they may have lain in this still, clear cold for ten thousand years. This is the universal cemetery of this planet, perhaps for ages."

"Forget 'em!" snarled Hal-Al. "There are no kisses in a petrified girl!"

They sped on over the unbelievable vast city of the dead, where perhaps was every inhabitant that had died on the planet in centuries. Tiered millions on millions, all imperishably petrified by some natural waters or alchemy of science, and changed to crystal in the glowing colors and beauty of life and youth.

"And all girls!" said Hal-Al. "Where are their dead women and dead men?"

"That question came to me," observed Davidson. "But we entered only a few of their tombs among all this endless number, and we may have chanced on a section given over to young women exclusively. Yet I fear this strange scarlet planet! None may be allowed to grow old here, but all are destroyed in the glow of youth, or destroy themselves."

"They're a strange, mad people!" exclaimed Bailee. "But I forgive them for their handsome girls."

"Handsome girls and pig-serpent headed men—I wonder which have the brains that run the government," considered Hal-Al.

"None of these," declared the little corporal. "Unless they have become as insects and do not require superior mentalities, but carry out a certain level routine of conduct and government from which none have the courage of originality to deviate. However, we have seen so little of the planet this is like judging a man by a half hour's acquaintance, or a lifetime by a few minutes."

"The best way to judge a race is by its girls," grinned Bailee. "You can't make a silk race out of sow girls, but give me silk girls and I'll gamble on the race."

"Give me nothing!!" growled Hal-Al. "I'll go get them, if there are any silk girls around."

"Help yourself," replied Bailee. "There are millions of silken girls below yonder, but you'll never hear the rustle of any of that fine silk again. It's all rolled back on the cold, hard bolt of death and no man's hand will ever unroll five feet four of the precious stuff."

"Shut your mouth!" growled Hal-Al. "You make my liver sour."

"IT'S the same on the old earth," continued Bailee. "Only the dead girls there are all bolted under the green sod. 'Tis a cleaner burial they have on this scarlet planet, but a sadder one, for it lingers, it lingers. They are carrying too much tail light here and shining backwards over the way they have come. Give me a big bright head-light, without any dimmer, shining up the future, and the past all smothered in the blue smother of forgetfulness; without a single tail light for sorrow, walking among her memories, to see what is no more!"

In time they left the final tomb behind them and seemed again to hang for hours in a void, for below them were no visible objects to break the level floor of the wilderness and mark their progress. But at last they came over a rough, broken land, where they found it sufficiently warm to remove their thermo-suits, then above scanty grasses, that thickened slowly but steadily. Then rising, they passed over a high range of mountains that sparkled with innumerable pools, clear as dew. Suddenly a shout burst from their throats, for they had come above what seemed a veritable paradise.

"We've broke through the big, pearly gates!" exclaimed Bailee. "Hide yourself, Hal, or St. Peter will see you and call out the fumigation brigade."

The two younger men began a tussle which lasted while Davidson docked the plane at the margin of the lake that sparkled like a great jewel set in the wonderful panorama before them.

"We'll have to use caution here," advised the little corporal. "This is no fortuitous combination

of charming natural landscapes, but evidently a great park planned by minds perhaps superior to our own. There must be guards everywhere to protect the locality from intruders and vandals, unless this race has reached that high artistic level where beauty is its own security."

"I feel like I was treading on a painting of heaven in a golden frame," grinned Bailee. "Now if we can but come on a troupe of handsome girls laughing beside the sparkling waters, what a masterpiece it will be."

"I feel like a torch procession about to begin!" nodded Hal-Al. "Let's have a swim first and soak all the alkali out of our livers."

The younger men stripped like two schoolboys racing to be first into a pool, and Davidson dumped their clothing into the plane and waited about with his automatic handy.

"Throw off your shirt!" tempted Bailee, on coming to the surface and blowing the water from his mouth. "If any girls arrive, you can duck while I fetch your clothes."

Davidson laughed, and now throwing off discretion with his clothing sprang into the water, and soon was in a royal fight with the other men. He found the water very clear but a trifle heavy and with a slightly mineral-bitter though not unpleasing taste. They had passed about ten minutes buffetting one another about and testing their wind by remaining for sometime under the surface of the lake, when Hal-Al suddenly checked his companions and pointed down the shore.

An Unhuman Custom

THEY ducked to their chins and stared. Approaching the water's edge was a slender handsome girl, attired in a sheer floating gossamer veil of faint heliotrope. Hal-Al reached forth two strong hands and dragged Bailee's and Davidson's heads under the surface of the water, and the men had some difficulty in releasing themselves.

"You'll pay for that fraction of a second that I lost!" threatened Bailee. "Shut up now like a man: would you frighten her away?"

The girl advanced to the edge of the water, and folding her hands before her eyes hesitated a moment, then stepped into the lake and kept on as along a path till she disappeared from view beneath the water.

"Like a mermaid," considered Hal-Al. "Watch where she comes up and we'll surround and take her. And you, corporal, shall be the minister and Bailee the best man."

They waited but the girl did not reappear in sight. "Look lively there!" exclaimed Hal-Al. "She'll give us the slip yet."

Bailee pawed the water with impatience. "Let's swim out! She may be in a dream and be drowned before she knows it."

"She evidently knows what she's about," said Davidson, but he was as uneasy as the others, and when they suddenly broke the thin tense leash of hesitation and clove forwards through the water he followed, and soon led, being the faster swimmer. But they did not come on the girl, though they circled about the locality for fully fifteen minutes.

Bailee groaned. "It's like hunting for a lost pearl in the ocean!"

"I'm going out again," said Hal-Al, when the men had rested a few minutes ashore and thrashed the chill off one another, for the water had taken on a peculiar coldness after they had been in it a little while. "If I get the cramps, pick me up with the plane."

"Let me drown if I don't find her!" sighed Bailee. "Maybe my ghost will walk under the waters with her pretty shape. Oh, man, they're sweet while they're here, and sweeter when they're gone!"

"Get in the plane," directed Davidson. "We'll go out further and hunt. We should have used the plane before, but who would have thought she could vanish like a bubble."

They sprang aboard the H-T and, going out a little under the water, while Davidson rose and scanned the neighboring surface of the lake. But there was no sign of the girl anywhere visible to him.

"Scarcely a suicide," he considered. "She did not appear sufficently distracted. Yet she seemed to hesitate."

He saw Hal-Al rise and wave one arm towards him, then he caught his hello and dropped the hydro-terra to his side.

"Throw me a rope!"

Davidson obeyed, whereupon Hal-Al dived, fastened the rope to some object below and came up with the rope's end between his teeth. He clambered aboard and began to pull in the rope. Davidson glimpsed the object attached to the rope before it come to the surface of the water.

"A girl!"

Together they lifted the slender form into the plane, then Hal-Al stood up, six feet-two of dripping, naked manhood, and cursed the scarlet planet. Water of it, land of it, law of it, and god of it. Then Bailee came aboard and joined him, and in his heart the little corporal cursed the custom of the land which had brought this girl to her death, and vowed he would smash the head of that custom, if he could find it, to smash. But more likely, he reflected, he would not even find the tail of it to scotch.

"I counted seven of them in one dive to the bottom!" raged Bailee. "But the smallest of them was too heavy on my heart to bring up. Oh, the sweet dead girls!"

"Let her back into the water," commanded Davidson. "Some day they will come for her and take her to her place in one of those cold tombs in the desert."

Hal-Al slipped the rope from the lovely petrified crystal form that lay on the deck. "She's mine!" he said soberly. Then he bent over and kissed the cold rosebud mouth, and, arising, knocked Bailee from his feet before the latter could kiss the same red mouth. In another moment he had slid the imperishable form of lovelines back into the concealing waters.

THE two younger men faced one another with heaving chests, then Bailee put out his hand and Hal-Al shook it and the matter was closed.

"There will be little use searching further to recover this girl we saw enter the lake," said Davidson. "She came here to die, and by now is drowned. Perhaps the whole race religiously dies after this manner at a certain age, in health and youth and beauty."

"What a waste of perfectly good girls!" groaned Bailee. "I'll hang around the shore and shoo them away from the water, and keep five or six for my pains, like pretty kittens."

"I'll do the same," growled Hal-Al. "And I'll do it now."

"I doubt if it will do any good," said Davidson. "They are probably as deeply ingrained in this belief as we are in the opposite, and time and custom adjusts us to all persuasions. Perhaps they would be as deeply shamed not to drown themselves at an appointed time and be petrified by the water as we would be to outrage our highest principles of honor. We would but save them from drowning to make them miserable old women, outcasts among their race and apostates to their faith."

"It mayn't do them any good," said Bailee. "But it will do me a lot of good to take a whack at this fool custom. Why, man, there was ten years of youth and beauty and laughter left in that young girl who just drowned herself. This is a personal matter with me and not philosophy, and personality is the only philosophy worth a dinker's ham!"

"Let me get one shot at the high priest of this faith, and there won't be any such animal!" growled Hal-Al.

"I'll help you salt his skin," nodded the little corporal. "However we have no more evidence than our own supposition that the inhabitants of this planet destroy themselves in their youth, except the fact that so far we have seen no old people, or people of middle age. Let us be assured that we are right in the facts, and that we have some happier system to offer them than we would destroy; then, if we can recover the planet plane, we'll look into this matter at once, and reach the head of it, if it has any head other than old custom handed down from generation to generation."

Bailee grinned. "The quickest way to change old brute customs is to knock their old brute customers on the head that encourage those customs. And I'm a P. O. E., or Professor of Expeditiousness!"

"We'll go ashore and save a girl or two while we discuss the impossibility of recovering the planet-plane," said Hal-Al.

The began hastily to dress, Davidson's blood boiling, in spite of his somewhat philosophical structure of mind, at his suspicions of the inhumanity of the laws or customs of the scarlet planet. Yet, as he admired the beauties of the great park, on the border of which he stood, he could not deny that though the ways of this race were terrible, as compared with the ways of the kindly earth, there was yet a clean brightness about those ways as about fire itself. Here were waters changing youth into crystal, incorruptible death, before age deformed it with ugliness, weariness and pain.

Here life was a short chain of perfect pearls and not a long, thinning chain of dull glass with a few imperfect jewels to relieve its dragging length. Here the play was all poetry and soon over, but what a play! Wherein the lovely chorus drank warm blood instead of cold wine. Here beauty was first and safety perhaps not at all. Here they glided about in their spherical coaches and sported by the crystal streams, taking no thought of the morrow, whose true name is care, and paying for all with an early, self-inflicted death. Exquisitely bright but dreadfully swift passing!

The little corporal heartily wished himself many x-ometers distant from this mysterious scarlet planet, for he and his companions were but as three moles who had tunneled upwards into fire, and would likely be consumed.

"We had best retreat from this lake," he advised. "We may save some girl from drowning herself, but we probably will pay for our gallantry with our lives, and she will drown herself later."

"Me retreat!" growled Hal-Al. "There's no such me!"

"But we can't remain here forever," protested Davidson. "No matter how many we turn back, there will be more follow. They are but moths flying into the flame, and will not thank us for snuffing out their flame."

Bailee grinned. "I'm something of a flame myself. Let them singe their wings in me. I propose we stick around here and mark off a space and save all the girls that approach in that space, and let the others go, for a man has to draw the line somewhere even with honor and girls."

"That's a good idea," nodded Hal-Al. "Sometimes you do strike fire with that punk brain of yours."

DAVIDSON saw that he could not move them to depart and continue their search for the planet-plane. With the great plane again in his possession, he might return to the earth and fetch back a company of daring spirits, and stand some chance of reforming the scarlet planet. But without the plane, and with only two companions, he felt that he could accomplish but little, and that little would soon perish because of its very littleness. "We'll make the best of the situation," he yielded. "My heart is with you, but my head is with the planet-plane."

Bailee grinned. "Then that's settled—till somebody starts a fight. Now we'll draw straws to decide who'll make love to the first girl we save."

Hal-Al arranged three pieces of scarlet grass. "The longest straw wins."

Bailee drew without hesitation, then Davidson drew; then each exposed his hand. The little corporal had drawn the longest blade of grass. The others groaned, but immediately congratulated him.

They prepared a substantial meal and ate it,

then, lighting their pipes, sat about and waited for the first girl to appear. Bailee offered to introduce Davidson to three of the finest girls in Omaha, and give him a small submarine fishing boat which he owned, for all the latter's rights and claims to the first girl who should approach the lake to drown herself. Hal-Al met this offer with certain inducements of his own. The little corporal laughed and told them that the girl could choose for herself, if she chose at all, and if either of them took any unfair advantage of her he would shoot him on the spot.

"That's all right," nodded Hal-Al. "I would do the same favor for you. But all I want is to start even with you two, and no handicap, and if she's a girl I'll win her fair in three days, and if she's a woman I'll win her in one day."

"We'll save the girl first," replied Davidson. "Then, recollect, the days here are several months long."

"And the nights as long," grinned Bailee. "Oh, man, what a night to make love in, if they but have a moon and music on the waters!"

Davidson laughed. "That may prove more prophecy than jest!" Then simultaneously their hands leapt to their automatics, but they did not draw them.

CHAPTER XI.

Mutiny

TOWARDS the tree men glided a large serpent with a woman's head, the whole body scaled with opalescent gold and purple. The face had the large eyes and rosebud mouth of the girl harpies, but the hair about it was not long and wavy but short and curling, and shone like a silken aurora about the head.

"Oh the beauty!" panted Hal-Al.

She coiled and rose to the height of a woman and expanded with light like a jewel, and they saw that she had the full white bosoms of a woman. Then the air about them became fragrant as if a bowl of exquisite perfume had been spilled beneath their nostrils.

"Quick!" commanded Davidson. "Get into the plane!" But he had to force his companions back under the rail where they were seated. Then Bailee broke away and sought to clamber beneath the rail, but the little corporal sent him reeling with a blow across the chest, and leaping to the pilot-keys shot the plane off like a rocket.

"Hell!" snarled Hal-Al. "Can't you let a man look?"

"No, that's not for a man to look at twice!"

Hal-Al became ugly and Davidson shot low over the lake, in case he should be attacked and knocked from the plane, for there was a dangerous light in the deep-set eyes of the younger man. It may have been the lovely tempting face that had got the latter, or it may have been the exquisite, maddening perfume. But whichever it was that had momentarily crazed his friend, the little corporal had no wish to consider. He proposed to get away with the two fine young fellows, alive and undamned.

Then Bailee arose and passed his opinion on the older man in words of one syllable but seven dimensions, but the little corporal laughed at them both and called them yellow, and demanded what they were going to do about it, for he had drawn the long blade of grass and the serpent girl was his to pursue or leave alone.

Hal-Al was the first to see white again and apologize, then Bailee apologized. But both maintained that Davidson had no right to take them away from the shore of the lake, and demanded he return immediately to the locality they had left.

"Besides," said Bailee, recalling more particularly the terms of their agreement, "our bargain was about some girl we should save from drowning, and this serpent was scarcely a girl, and we didn't save her either. You've stepped over your contract and are standing on pure gall!"

"I retract my apology," growled Hal-Al. "Bailee is right about this not being in our bargain."

The little corporal promptly swiveled the cyclo-gun on them and replied that he would be damned if he would land the plane till they had passed over the dangerous park below them, and at the first move on their part to capture the plane he would blow them to hell, and a cleaner hell than they were just leaving.

Bailee grinned. "Well, have it your own way, corporal, but don't mistake force for right, unless you wish to establish a precedent and have us later apply that precedent to you."

"To the devil with precedent!" roared Hal-Al. "It isn't the gun that makes me hesitate to take the plane. Its because I don't want a man to have my blood on his hands, when he comes to his senses again!"

BUT Davidson had the courage of his convictions and held the younger men at bay while he let the plane out to its full limit of speed. It was a half hour before Hal-Al and Bailee recalled that there wasn't a single shot left in the gun, whereupon they called Davidson's bluff. He laughed at them and told them to go ahead and take the plane and land and he would drop off with his share of baggage and go one alone, while they could return in the plane, and no doubt the serpent woman would be waiting for them, to sting them to death, or worse.

"I'll be damned if I will!" grumbled Hal-Al. "You've been a good scout and I'll see you safe back to the planet-plane, and headed for the earth before I leave you. Then I'll leave you damn sweet and quick!"

The little corporal merely smiled, for they had passed over the great park, which was about two hundred miles across, and come above a less attractive and, so he believed, a less dangerous country. Here he landed the plane beside a stream and, procuring some ammunition from one of the supply chests aboard, loaded the cyclo gun, which he had neglected to reload after their fight with the three spheres. The two younger men leaped from the plane to finish a good-natured bout they had started aboard, and having given one another bloody noses drew off to the stream to wash away

the blood. They had no sooner done so than both began to dance and throw themselves about and yell, as if they were crazed. Their antics were so ridiculous that Davidson, thinking them in jest, could not restrain a laugh. But he quickly realized that it was no laughing matter, and believing their strange actions due to the water they had drank, called to them to thrust their fingers down their throats and try to eject the water from their stomachs. Then he advanced towards them, when suddenly his whole body was filled with a million stinging, hair-like pains, that caused him also to leap about and yell with anguish and anger.

"Get back to the plane!" he called to the others, with a contortion of his body between every word, with great effort they succeeded, and tumbling aboard. Pirouetting with pain to the pilot keys, Davidson managed to get his fingers down on the board and start the plane. The distress left them as quickly and mysteriously as it had come, and they searched for insects on their persons, or some visible cause of their pains.

They found no vermin and no rash on the skin, and concluded they had come into the field of a ray thrown by some concealed sphere, which possessed the power of transforming any living creature into the genus of stinging itch. Turning the plane about they returned directly above the spot where they had been so unpleasantly afflicted.

"I felt just like I was shot full of hot chopped hair!" growled Hal-Al. "These inhabitants are damned original, but damn their originality!"

"I've nothing to say!" commented Bailee. "I'm one of the great, sweet silences. But just let me get a pot shot at 'em!"

"There it is!" exclaimed Davidson, pointing to a sphere below not three hundred meters to the right. "We got stung with a ray from that!"

"Bow it up!" growled Hal-Al.

"Scrap it!" scowled Bailee, making a move towards the cyclo-gun.

But Davidson protested. "Hold on, it may be full of pretty girls!"

Bailee hesitated. "That's different! But how's a man going to make love to a girl inside a live porcupine?"

"This is a sting-ray of a planet!" exclaimed Hal-Al. "First, those bat girls, that bit a piece out of our wrists. Then those dead, crystalized girls, about as good as a stick of glass candy to a hungry man. Then a fancy snake girl that quits friendship at the neck. And now a bunch of girls inside a ball of red hot needles. This must be hell!"

Bailee grinned. "Fairer words were never spoken by falser face! Let's keep going till we run into a new belt of girls, or run out of power."

"While there's distance there's hope!" said Davidson, turning the plane partly about and making away while the others were in the mod to proceed. "Who knows but we may run into a belt of easier girls within a few hours, for it is an old belief that hell is the gate of heaven and maybe we're about through the gate."

"That's right, corporal!" nodded Bailee. "Light up that old cracked lantern of hope and we'll follow you on through the dark to the devil knows where. You're good at swinging that cracked old lantern of hope and crying, 'All aboard for a brighter land!' But I notice the further we go on your route the closer the tunnels run together and the bumpier the roadbed gets to be!"

"Shut up!" growled Hal-Al. "You ought to see what is at the end of the tunnels."

"What?"

"It's too bright to be seen."

"Is it a bonfire of discarded hopes?"

"No, its a girl! An insulated girl that won't shock your hopes every time you touch her."

"I'll bet she's all insulation and no voltage. Like an Egyptian mummy girl."

"Hang it!" protested the little corporal. "I didn't make this planet, and I'm trying to recover the planet-plane so that you can get back as quickly as possible to the soft, sweet girls of the earth."

A Strange Sight

BOTH younger men groaned in unison. "Soft and sweet!" sighed Bailee. "Listen to him! He knows how to joggle the old lantern of hope to keep a man moving through the bog. Well, we'll follow it a little longer, corporal, but if there isn't an insulated girl at the end of the next thousand miles, I'm going to slap spit on my palm and follow the spit instead of you."

"You'd better follow me," said Hal-Al. "I've got more than spit in my head."

"It won't get you any further," grinned Bailee. "And its not as visible and therefore not as subject to the evidence and the proof."

"Very well," agreed Davidson. "We'll make it a thousand miles, and then land and talk it over."

"We'll talk it over, provided you don't do any of the talking," said Bailee. "I mistake too much of your talking for my thinking."

They made a thousand miles by the speedometer and at that precise distance came on a rather astonishing sight. Within a walled inclosure of over two hundred meters square were forty-two spheres, each about four meters in diameter, and one immense sphere fully twelve meters through. The lesser spheres seemed to be engaged at an attempt to surround the larger sphere and bear it to the wall, while the latter sought to shoulder itself back to the center of the field and hold that position.

Again and again the lesser spheres would mass and hurl themselves against the great sphere, but the latter would evade them with extreme adroitness, or meet their mass and hurl them back like so many giant footballs. They could hear the ring of sphere meeting sphere, like great clapperless bells, but no sphere appeared to be cracked or injured by the clashings, and from their experience inside the sphere of the seven harpies the three men were reasonably confident that the passengers below scarcely felt the shock of contact.

"They're trying to scrap the big marble," suggested Bailee.

"More like a friendly joust," affirmed David-

son. "Or perhaps some try-out with a new invention."

"If we could get hold of the big marble," meditated Hal-Al, "we could go gliding through the land like a trillionaire, and kiss all the pretty girls from here to sunset."

"And sunset weeks away!" grinned Bailee. "Let's capture it!"

Hal-Al shook his head. "There are two good reasons against it. First, its against the law, and, second, it's not possible."

The giant sphere had shouldered its way to the center of the walled field and now held that center for some minutes, in spite of the combined attack of the forty-two lesser spheres. This seemed to decide or conclude the game or battle, for the lesser spheres ceased their attack and ranged themselves six deep before the giant sphere. Immediately the door of the latter was thrown open and a magnificent pig-serpent headed giant nearly four meters in height strode forth and began what evidently was an oration of some sort for the benefit of the audience assembled before him.

Throwing on the multiplex vibrator the three men hung silently in the air above this scene, impressed by the splendid figure of the giant, his dignified deportment, and the roll of his mighty voice that plainly reached them. Davidson would have given all his Greek to have understood a few words of what was being said.

"He's an inventor and these others are the board of directors to some sphere trust," suggested Bailee. "He's explaining a new patent push-ball mechanism."

"Be quiet!" commanded Hal-Al. "Shall the jackal yelp while the lion is roaring?"

"Then why do you yelp when I speak?" grinned Bailee.

They Attack!

THE giant now ceased his oration, if such it was, and folding his arms seemed to await either the result of his eloquence or a challenge from the spheres before him. In another moment the two younger men were raging with envy, and even the little corporal felt a touch of that consuming fever, for the doors to several of the lesser spheres were thrown open, and from each sphere came one or two, and in a single instance, three, of those lovely great-eyed girls that they had previously met, and these girls now made their way across the open space before the giant and entered his huge sphere.

"Sweethearts!" raged Bailee. "Nine of them! The son of a Chautauqua!"

"Ten!" snarled Hal-Al, as a tenth girl hurried forward and entered the great sphere.

"Eleven!" groaned Bailee, as the giant's eloquence was rewarded by one more proselyte.

"Twelve!" roared Hal-Al. "Here's where I get out and get in!"

"Hold on!" advised Davidson. "He may be a religious disciple, persuading these girls to some higher life."

"And him the higher life!" exclaimed Bailee. "I've run across a lot of those self-appointed higher lifes!"

"I'm a little of the higher life myself!" rumbled Hal-Al.

Bailee's hand slipped to his automatic.

"Twelve for that big talk!" he muttered. "I ought to get three at least for the small, sweet talk I can put up."

"I've ten tongues on my hands!" raged Hal-Al. "And I'd talk business with every one of them, if I could get that big lad alone about ten minutes."

"He could crack our three heads together with one hand," smiled Davidson. "Beside, we know nothing of his purpose. These may be runaway girls that he is seeking to persuade to return home."

"He's an old mormon!" growled Hal-Al. "And I'll not throw any purple, poetic mantle over his bloated shoulders, but I'll strip him of his yellow goat's hide! Here's where I land and get me a pass to the big show."

"Counting twelve for him, should allow eight for me and four for Hal," said Bailee. "Drop us by the gate, corporal, and we'll go inside and make a little speech ourselves on the higher life. It's evident that these are free, roaming girls looking for husbands, and this is the corral where the males round them up and put their brand on their sweet red lips."

"Not while I have charge of this plane," replied the little corporal. "You'd never come from that field alive."

"You won't?" demanded Bailee.

"You won't?" demanded Hal-Al.

"I won't!" affirmed Davidson.

The two younger men advanced upon the little corporal, whereupon he drew his Metzer and fired. For a moment he believed that he had fixed them both so that they would almost immediately fall asleep, but they merely laughed and rushed him. Then Hal-Al held Davidson while Bailee landed the plane just outside the walled field.

In another minute the two young fellows had abandoned the plane and were hurrying away towards the gate of the field. The little corporal had been no physical match for Hal-Al, and he now examined the Metzer and found it had been tampered with and the cocaine charges withdrawn from the shells.

"Both madmen!" grunted Davidson. "I'll follow and drop them a ladder when they get enough of their own folly." He shot over the field, and from here he saw his companions approach the gate, kneel, and fire their Metzers at the giant, who evidently was not satisfied with his success, for he had resumed his oration to the audience concealed in the forty-two spheres before him.

The giant started, hesitated a moment by reason of the slight stinging pain of the cocaine pellets entering his skin, then calmly resumed his oration. But drowsiness got him before he had proceeded far, then sleep overcame the big fellow and he sank down on the earth like a colossus gently lowered from its pedestal. Immediately Bailee

and Hal-Al raced across the intervening distance and dashed into the great sphere.

DAVIDSON had sought to reload his own Metzer from the store chests, that he might put his friends to sleep before they should be captured, but he had failed of success, as the two younger men had made a thorough job of the matter and concealed the entire supply of cocaine shells. Then the little corporal lay across the rail of the plane and roared with laughter, as the giant sphere began to rush about like a crazed thing, and pound itself against the wall of the field, and slam into the lesser spheres, and spin like a top. Evidently one or both men were at the pilot keys, attempting unsuccessfully to get the sphere out of the field.

Finally they pressed the right key and escaped from the walled inclosure, gliding across the country followed by the forty-two lesser spheres, like a great engine by a train of cars. Davidson immediately swooped down and bound the sleeping giant with all the rope he could spare, till the latter resembled a kind of human cocoon, then hoisted him aboard the scout-plane and followed the spheres.

The little corporal proposed to get his two friends back to the plane and return the great sphere to the sleeping giant beside him, who evidently was the rightful owner of that sphere. Perhaps he had come from some distant country with a fair offer to the girls, seeking to persuade them to accompany him back to his own land. Or had come as a missionary of that which considered itself a higher race, to win these marvelously lovely creatures from their too-animal trait of drinking blood, as in the old days, on the earth, the Spanish missionaries journeyed to the distant West to win the Indian from barbarism to Christianity.

If he had come purely as a male seeking his females, these females had gone to him freely, and the two young fellows had no right to cast the shadow of their violence across that free path. Besides, they were no match for so many, and it is folly to light a fire greater than one can extinquish.

Suddenly the giant sphere came to a stop, whereupon Davidson descended as low and near as he dared, for he had great respect for the paralyzant ray of these gliding balls. Then the door of the sphere was opened and out shot two figures, like two scarecrows suddenly animated with life. They ran, staggered, fell, rose again and half ran, half staggered on.

CHAPTER XII.

The Planet-Plane Again!

THE little corporal recognized Hal-Al and Bailee in these two sorry figures staggering below him, and giving them the siren signal to halt, dropped down beside them, intending to drag them aboard the plane like two spent swimmers. He counted on the swiftness and unexpectedness of his recue to get him clear before the enemy had the wit to act. He left the plane engine running to carry him automatically from danger.

A black ray clipped half the plane and plunged it into total obscurity, just as he dragged Hal-Al aboard. But now, before he could reach Bailee, the latter was cut off from view. Davidson shouted for him to come closer, and fairly hanging to the plane by his toes, he swept the blackness before him and came into contact with the person of his friend.

He dragged himself back, and Bailee with him. He heard the man sink with a groan to the plane floor, then groping his way to the pilot-keys Davidson shot the plane into the air, just as all power went out of his lower limbs, where a paralyzant ray had clipped them.

But almost instantly he was himself again—having been carried clear of the rays—and arising from where he had keeled over he got to a supply chest and brought each man a sleeping capsule for they had lost so much blood he feared they might become crazed and attempt to spring overboard.

Before Bailee passed under the influence of the drug Davidson heard him rave: "There were forty of them, drinking me alive!"

Davidson continued to circle about the scene till the spheres below gave over search for the plane, and glided away in various directions. Then he followed the larger sphere, with a view of returning its owner. He didn't want the giant on the plane for girls, gold or glory. He wanted only those amenable to his reason or right hand, and he suspected the giant possessed more intelligence than himself, and was positive the fellow possessed far more physical strength. He measured him. He was eleven feet, two inches, and he estimated his weight to be around seven hundred pounds.

Evidently some one responsible, or attached to his prisoner, had taken over the larger sphere, for it was now directed towards the walled inclosure it had recently left, no doubt for the purpose of recovering the person of the giant.

Davidson saw his opportunity and, making a landing in the field well ahead of the sphere, unbound the giant, heaved him from the plane and arose before he could be attacked by a ray. The sphere came to where the giant lay and a troupe of lovely girl harpies came forth and bore him within. Then the great ball left the field and glided away, with the little corporal following overhead, hoping it would lead to some city, town or village.

Yet he doubted if there were any such, persuaded that the situation on the scarlet planet was somewhat similar to that which history recorded as prevailing on the earth about the year two thousand four hundred A.D., when the inhabitants of the earth had all become motor-minded and, abandoning their cities and homes, had taken to living a kind of super-nomadic life in their electro-motor cars.

Both Bailee and Hal-Al had been so heavily drained of blood by the forty harpies in the giant's sphere that they awakened from their drugged sleep with wandering minds, so Davidson abandoned his project of following the giant sphere and, landing by a little stream near a wood, let

the two men lay around on the grass in the sunshine. Here he procured fresh fruits and game and managed to get Hal-Al back to a condition in which he could be trusted to watch camp before Davidson fell asleep on his feet.

WHEN the little corporal awoke, Bailee too was rational again, but both of the younger men were very indifferent and slothful. He gave them a cursing that did him, if not his companions a world of good.

Hal-Al and Bailee slept most of the time for a week of bright, sunlight hours, then they began to swear and jest again, and Davidson gave them thirty-six hours to buck up and resume their journey.

Bailee acknowledged that he had been a little careless in rushing so many harpies in a body, but the next time he proposed to smear himself from head to heel with some bitter herb and they would attack Hal-Al and not him.

"I must have been talking aloud in my sleep," said Hal-Al. "For I thought of the same plan myself."

What could he do with a pair of merry daredevils like these young fellows—plotting another attack on a honey-hive while they were yet pulling from their skins the stings received in a previous attack!

The little corporal laughed and let that part of his heart go which held any anger towards them. At least they had daring, if they had not any caution, and he must make the best of that daring and adroitly supply the caution himself. And perhaps, after all, daring is more noble than caution in youth.

"I believe I like you better for the damn fools you are by nature," he said, "that I could like you for the sensible fellows I would make you by example."

Bailee grinned. "A wise man never expects an Irish stew to be a *pate de foie gras*, but he eats the Irish stew and thanks his billikin that it isn't a grass goulash. Let's put the clock ahead and eat again."

While the two other ate again, Davidson stripped and took a bath. He had just got back into his clothes when that occurred which set his heart pounding as if it would knock every rivet loose in his frame. He beheld the great Hersovitch-Chang planet-plane drifting towards him, in the bright still air.

The little corporal shouted for the others to get into the scout plane, and the moment they had clambered aboard in safety, he sprang over the rail and pressed the ascension key. The hydro-terra sped towards the planet-plane like a sparrow hawk after a great eagle, and shortly docked on the landing-deck of the super-plane.

Davidson felt like a wandering unbodied soul suddenly born again in a perfect body, with all its marvelous machinery to execute the desires of the heart.

"We are a trained army again, instead of three wandering space hoboes!" he congratulated his companions.

He now sought to open the door that led below, but it proved to be fastened from within.

"We must get inside quickly!" he exclaimed in alarm. "If Jaquet is inside and starts off without knowing we are up here, he may carry us beyond the atmosphere, and we will perish before we can fly the H-T."

"If he knows we're here he'll start off all the sooner," growled Hal-Al. "He's probably asleep and didn't see us dock. We had better take him by surprise. Give me a rope ladder and I'll try the torpedo door, and both of you get back into the H-T. There's no use of the three of us being killed by this crafty snake."

There was no time for argument, for the men realized they were in a very precarious situation. Davidson fetched a rope ladder from the H-T, and Hal-Al hurried off towards the stern of the planet-plane, proposing to swing the ladder from some bolt or bar and attempt to gain entrance by the torpedo door. The main door of the planet-plane was beyond their reach from the landing-deck.

The little corporal seized a second short rope ladder and made towards the mouth of the hurricane-hose, a powerful apparatus for hurling compressed air or gas from the planet-plane, for utility or defense. Bailee took the ladder from his hands. "No you don't, corporal!" he protested. "The pressure might get turned on and blow you home to hell! Let me try it first."

But Bailee's bulk was a little too great to allow him to crawl through the mouth of the hurricane-hose, and he gave over the attempt. Davidson refused to delay till Hal-Al should return and report his success at the torpedo-door, since every moment was precious as life, which was very precious to the little corporal just at that moment, with the great planet-plane again beneath his feet.

He swung down and crawled into the mouth of the hose and stuck half way in, a ghastly situation. But Bailee swung over and pulled him free and hoisted him back to the deck. Here Davidson stripped off all his clothing and made the attempt again. The situation was that of a naked man in a loaded cannon, for at any moment the pressure might be turned on the hurricane-hose by the man Jaquet, who no doubt had been guilty of stealing the super-plane and abandoning his companions, having previously faked suicide.

A Dangerous Chance

PUSHING his automatic before him, Davidson squirmed forward in the hose till he came to the widening at its base. Could he unscrew the coupling sleeve from his position within the hose, then push the hose sufficiently to one side of the upper coupling-joint to give him room to squeeze out?

The coupling consisted of a simple form of threaded sleeve overlapping the threaded base-joint of the hose and a similar threaded joint extending from the closed pressure chamber beyond. These two joints did not abut against one another by several inches, which would allow a man within the hose sufficient room to press his palms against the inner side of the coupling-

sleeve and twist it about until it screwed off one of the connecting joints, it being immaterial which, since it was the sole coupling.

It was a dangerous feat for Davidson to undertake in view of the fact that either by accident or purposely, he might be blown from the hose at terrific speed. But he was confident that the torpedo-door, where Hal-Al hoped to gain entrance to the planet-plane, would be bolted from the inside—as the landing-deck trap had been—and in such a manner that the bolt could not be shot free with an automatic. The hurricane-hose seemed to offer the only possibility of gaining an entrance to the plane, and the little corporal proposed to stake his life on the attempt. He felt in his heart that life would be intolerable to him on the great scarlet planet, his one interest being to get away on the heels of the first opportunity.

(Illustrated by Paul)

They found that they could not proceed further without extreme effort. The bubbles had become rigid as thick spheres of glass.

The coupling-sleeve yielded and turned as he pressed it about with his palms, and he succeeded in working it from the threads of the upper joint. Then he hurled himself against the sides of the great rubber hose and jolted the hose sufficiently aside to get his hand through to the floor without. With this leverage he pushed the heavy stiff hose to one side till he was enabled to squeeze his body free of the hose and stand upright within the planet-plane.

Stark naked, with his automatic in his hand, he stole forward in the obscurity of the dynamo room. He must capture Jaquet, dock the plane and let his companions enter. Perhaps the cleanest joy in life, to an active, robust man, is the overcoming of physical difficulties, with an attendant spice of danger. He felt jubilant at his success and hurried forward towards the fore of the plane, to take command of the pilot-keys.

Suddenly Chow, the cat, came racing playfully around a corridor, followed by Chang, the dog. Chow's tail bristled at the unexpected sight of Davidson, and Chang braced his forelegs and started to raise a rumpus, when he called them by name and they recognized him. Choking the dog's too enthusiastic greeting, and followed by the cat, he proceeded forward.

He reached the master key-board of the plane without being challenged or stopped, then pressed the key that released the door of the landing deck. Immediately he docked the plane in a wide field of scarlet grass.

He had just queered the switch-board by a secret combination, so that if he should be overcome by an enemy the plane could not be manipulated, when Bailee and Hal-Al came hurrying from above, having found he had released the bolt of the door of the landing-deck. Hal-Al had failed to gain an entrance by way of the torpedo-door, as Davidson had anticipated, and now the two younger men credited the little corporal with more courage and genius than he believed he deserved for having successfully crawled through the hurricane hose.

But he let their praise stand as they would be less inclined to rebel or desert him in the future, holding him their superior in sagacity at least, and so worth standing by through thick and thin.

THEY immediately began a search for the man Jaquet, or whoever had charge of the planet-plane. By the sleek condition of the cat and dog they were certain the animals had been

fed daily, but they could not come on their former companion, nor any one else. Had Jaquet fallen from the plane, as it had drifted lazily through the quiet air, and perhaps even then lay bruised or dying not many miles behind?

The directometer of the planet-plane showed that it had been traveling a slight arc to the left for a thousand miles, and had proceeded along a direct line previous to that for about two thousand miles.

"We must find this man," said Davidson. "To desert him would put us in his class, and while I'll associate with him, I'll not imitate him."

"His wheels were too involved for me," admitted Bailee. "He could turn all ways at once and strike any hour by any system of time. I'd like to take his wheels apart and leave out some of them. I'd leave out the wheel that made him run off with this big boat, and leave me with no better company than you two and myself."

"He's hid about the plane," considered Hal-Al. "He couldn't make himself invisible, but he could make himself almost as scarce as common decency in you."

They continued their search and shortly came on a sight that almost broke the hearts of the two younger men. The strange fellow Jaquet had filled one of the smaller storerooms with crystallized girls, without a living girl amongst them. Perhaps in his singularly involved brain he had hoped to bring these girls back to life by means not yet perfected. Or he may have entertained some thought of cutting them up into jewels, or vases.

"All dead!" groaned Bailee. "I'd lose the rest of his wheels and his pendulum besides, if I had the adjusting of his works."

They resumed their search, but could not come on the man himself, yet the plane was very large and there was a chance of his hiding for days from their most thorough quest.

"We'll go back slowly over his late course," said Davidson. "He may have fallen from the plane and we owe him this much consideration in common humanity. Besides, we'll see more of the country."

"It will be a tedious job looking for this snake in the grass," growled Hal-Al. "Leave him to marry a snake girl, while we go on and take in the sights."

"To oblivion with him!" exclaimed Bailee.

The little corporal pleaded with the two younger men not to abandon Jaquet, as he may have regretted taking the planet-plane and returned to pick them up. It would even appear that he had returned for them, since he had reappeared across their path. He could easily have betaken himself to some distant planet without fear of any punishment other than inflicted by his own conscience. And being of such an involved and flexible spirit, he could easily have shaped his conscience to his own comfort.

"Well, we'll give the fellow the benefit of the doubt, though there isn't going to be any doubt," assented Bailee. "But be reasonable, corporal, about the time you waste in searching for him, for you shouldn't string your pearls of charity into a necklace for a snake."

"Very well," agreed Davidson. "I'll let the plane drift low and take watch myself. Meantime you two would do well to look about a bit more for him, for he may be in hiding aboard with some handsome live bat-girl."

The little corporal said this more in jest than earnest but it proved to be a good stroke, as his two companions immediately set about to find the girl, which search would no doubt locate Jaquet, if he was aboard.

Time passed but they could not locate the man, either a-ship or a-land. Davidson pictured him as wandering through the scarlet grass, suffering the torment of the lost, and continually searching the heavens for some sign of the planet-plane, his body perhaps cruelly shaken from having fallen from the plane. Finally the two younger men broke into open rebellion and said the search was not worth the candle, since Davidson was using them for two of the candles.

The little corporal agreed to let them take the H-T and go on about their pleasure, while he remained in possession of the planet-plane and continued his search for Jaquet. He did not condemn them for their point of view, neither would he surrender his own point, and holding himself more responsible than they for the return of the planet-plane to the earth, he refused to surrender the great machine to them.

Bailee grinned. "Wait till we ask for the planet-plane, and you'll know when we ask for it by noticing it's gone."

"We'll bring you back the third handsomest girl on the horizon," said Hal-Al.

THEY stocked the little hydro-terra with several weeks' supply and left, promising to return within seven days, locating Davidson by radio.

When they were gone the little corporal resumed his search for Jaquet. During the first twelve hours he received five messages from the two absent men, stating that they were all right. In the next twelve hours he received but one message, stating the same fact. Then he received no more, and hoped that they had not been captured and for that reason were unable to communicate with him, but merely that they were too busy with their own enjoyments to trouble to call him up.

Since they had gone off in open rebellion against his policies, he was positive they would be captured and skinned alive before they would weaken sufficiently as to appeal to him for help; and for a little while he was ill-natured enough to wish them a taste of ill-fortune. Then he laughed at himself for wishing these merry young fellows ill because they were not made in a likeness of his own more cautious temperament.

He now observed beneath the plane a quantity of ragged, quartz-like deposit lying upon the ground, where the face of an abrupt ledge had been mined or broken away. The scarlet color of this deposit attracted him and, landing the plane nearby, he examined the quartz. In the next five hours he had carried aboard the plane sufficient of this quartz to make him the richest

earth-man of all time, should the stuff prove to be genuine 4-X-olite, which he was almost positive it would prove to be.

Two hours after loading aboard the quartz which was capable of increasing the life of a man almost indefinitely—he chanced on sight of the man Jaquet. He saw him through the binoculars at a considerable distance, walking across a level field of scarlet grass, and he was confident the other was not aware of the approaching planet-plane since he did not once look back.

Davidson immediately docked the plane behind a wood and made after Jaquet on a radiocycle. He wished to spy on the man and learn whether he was armed, before he approached too closely. He proposed to have it out with the fellow, either to take him back to the earth under guard or leave him for good on the scarlet planet, just as the other should choose.

Concealing his radiocycle amidst some handsome, tall, feather-like growth, he followed Jaquet on foot into a compact little wood, and had soon approached so closely on the latter's heels that he could overhear the man conversing with himself, a habit that many acquire who are much alone, or of a passionate nature.

Jaquet seemed to be reminiscent of some lady, and rather fervid in his praise for one of his years and mental weight. But Davidson reflected that he himself had not seen the lady and this might not be fervor but the honest due of the lovely subject. They came shortly to the opposite side of the wood and here the little corporal concealed himself behind a tree while the other man paced up and down but a few feet away along the margin of a miniature lake of sparkling clearness. Suddenly Davidson caught his breath with surprise.

CHAPTER XIII.

Jaquet and Davidson

FROM the water glided one of those amazing serpent-women, scaled in opalescent purple and gold, with a human face as lovely as the fancy could desire. From her white, woman breasts—the only mark of her human descent or affinity below her slender neck—the water, issuing from her ringlets of silken hair, dripped like a string of crystals.

Jaquet embraced her and kissed her rosebud mouth, and led her to a little knoll along the bank. Seating himself beside her, he broke into a hundred ejaculations of admiration, love and delight. He would attempt as if to seize her hands to kiss, but she had no arms, nor hands, nor even the rudiments of these, and this was the only thing that seemed to annoy him in his illusion of love, like a slight vexation that threatened to wake a happy sleeper from a pleasant dream.

"Never mind!" he cried. "You are more adorable without arms, for I can take you to myself without the protest of hands. Venus of the green old earth has no arms, and Venus with arms were not Venus, for she were not so wholly yielding."

The serpent-woman seemed willing enough to yield wholly to her lover's admiration, but Davidson did not fancy either her willingness, nor the situation. Yet he knew that Jaquet was mentally half snake himself—gliding, subtle and treacherous, and there was a certain consistency in his unhallowed love.

The little corporal decided to delay until Jaquet had taken his leave of the uncertain lady before he should accost him, when the air became fragrant, as if a bowl of exquisite perfume had been spilled beneath his nostrils. He held his breath so that his reason would not surrender to this seductive odor and slipped back through the wood and came out into the open beyond. Flinging himself down behind the tall feather-like growth where he had left his radiocycle, he waited for Jaquet to reappear from his amour. The latter could not come from the wood, or go far in the opposite direction, but Davidson could observe him from where he was concealed, and if necessary quickly overtake him on the speedy radiocycle.

He would give the man one chance to return to the earth on the planet-plane, unaccompanied by the snake-woman. If Jaquet refused, he would scarcely have another chance to return within a lifetime, unless Davidson was mistaken in his belief that the inhabitants of the scarlet planet had no means of traversing celestial space.

An hour later he rose up before Jaquet, as suddenly as an apparition, as the latter approached Davidson's place of concealment. Jaquet regarded the little corporal calmly.

"Well, we meet again!"

"We do!" replied Davidson. "Was it you who took the planet-plane?"

"Not a hazard but a suspicion, I see," smiled Jaquet. "Yes, I proclaimed a new mental state within myself, and commandeered the plane. Recently, however, I turned it adrift to the buffets of chance," he continued coolly. "I hoped that if you and your companions were still alive you would find it. It is no doubt drifting lazily somewhere between here and there."

Davidson realized that it would be a waste of passion for him to get angry at this man for appropriating the planet-plane, and later abandoning it, leaving him and his companions wholly without means to return to the earth. The very fact that he had renounced the earth showed that he had renounced every moral standard of the earth.

"YOU might have taken the pains to return it to us," said the little corporal. "We certainly would have appreciated the favor."

"I did the act in a moment of recreative enthusiasm," replied the other. "I was, as it were, carried away from myself into a new self, born again of the persuasive thought that if I got rid of the planet-plane I would get rid at once of the earth and its myriad vexations. Why should a brave man be vexed with that which he himself can put aside?"

"It was mental suicide of you!" exclaimed Da-

vidson. "You are not in adjustment to the ways of this strange planet, and must begin all over, like a babe in the cradle."

"There is the gist of it!" smiled Jaquet. "To begin all over, a grown man on an unstaled world—that is rebirth without the pangs of death or the weakness of infancy." He swept his arms about him. "And here all is novel, all is strange. Life opens to me again like a book unread: I feel like Jack at the top of the Beanstalk!"

"I wish you better luck than I anticipate you," replied the little corporal. "But beware of some of the inhabitants here! We have met with girls that drink blood, and women with the bodies of serpents."

"The more novel, the more interesting, not the more evil," said Jaquet. "Have you met with *many* women with the bodies of serpents?"

"Only twice, and then I fled them."

"You did best for a self-fearing man," nodded Jaquet. "When these serpent women shed tears of delight and love, their tears have a fragrance that enslaves you. Beware of their tears, little corporal! You are not brave enough yet for the unholy joys."

"You speak more in madness than in courage," replied Davidson. "However, I will be advised, and hope you also will shun these ladies, should you meet with any of them."

"Have no fears for me," said Jaquet. "Fear is but the lack of *I am* in a man, and I am every inch *I am*."

The little corporal smiled at the other's vigorous conceit and pride. "I often feel that way just after a good lunch, but I weary toward dinner time. Come now, if I should locate the planet-plane, do you mean to say that you wish to be left here, without any reasonable hopes of ever again seeing the earth? Or is it just a matter of bravado, since you believe the plane cannot be recovered?"

"It is a fine little earth we hail from," replied Jaquet. "But it has long lost its freshness and romance to me, and when romance dies the spirit is dead. Here every succeeding hour spring as unstaled as a new day to a youth in love, or a new verse to a poet! Here I still retain my identity, but life is all made anew!"

"If you feel that way about this planet, I shan't reason with you to leave it," said Davidson. "For your reason to remain is more persuasive to you than mine to leave. But if you should change your mind, or your mind should be changed by unfortunate circumstances, I will agree to take you back to the earth, should I be in possession of the planet-plane at the time, and in touch with you."

"I thank you," bowed Jaquet. "For to begin from the beginning, without which truth were incomplete, and that beginning is myself, since without myself the beginning were incomplete, I see that you are a reasonable man in not pressing me to change my opinion. For I hold my own conclusions as always best, and hold you as a reasonable man since you conform to my opinion of reasonableness. Not as another thinks and believes, but as *I* think and believe—that is my will and faith. For what can another do more than think and believe, and cannot I do the same?"

"Very well," nodded Davidson. "I see that I have no argument that will reach you till you are a better or a humbler man. I shall leave you now, and, after taking in a little of this planet, return to the earth and make my report to my superiors, and thank God I still have superiors, to help sustain my own imperfect being."

Treachery!

JAQUET shrugged his shoulders almost indifferently. "Then you have recovered the planet-plane."

"I'm in touch with it," admitted Davidson. "Would you like anything from it before I pass out of your call?"

"Nothing whatever. I choose to have no ravels of the earth to weave into my new garment. Besides, since they banished the devil from the earth, or he left it in sheer weariness of its mediocrity, it has become merely an old aunties' paradise. I would not array my flaming spirit in the shreds and patches of a dear old lady's gown!"

"May I ask why you stocked the plane with those crystallized girls?" inquired Davidson.

"You may ask," replied Jaquet. "But the best answer to one's own question is one's own answer, for a wise man will accept no answer but his own, and a fool doesn't matter."

Davidson saw that Jaquet was too independent to deal with. Or perhaps the latter suspected an intrusion on his love tryst and was angered at that breach of privacy. Or, it may be, Jaquet feared Davidson as a possible rival to the affections of the serpent-woman.

The little corporal extended his hand. "I wish you luck! But this thing of permanently detaching yourself from humanity, while still with the body of a man, may prove rather disastrous to your mind."

"I have no fear for my mind," smiled Jaquet. "Nothing can upset me but myself, and I refuse to upset myself."

"You are some philosopher," yielded Davidson. "But there are yet some things that can dash the philosophy out of the sturdiest philosopher and leave him but a groping, broken old man. You had better return to the earth and cast your lot with other men, till you have some other form than the human form."

Jaquet put the advice aside as a man might a handful of marbles offered him by a boy. "You cannot move me for I am self-moved only, and I hold that there is only cowardice between a man and all attainment. Who puts off fear has eaten of the tree of life and become as the gods. I wish you a pleasant journey back to the earth and remember, though, you may sometime cast your mind into me, you cannot plummet me."

The little corporal took it that Jaquet was merely politely telling him to go to the devil. That he didn't want his company. But Davidson wanted his companion to give over this madness for the serpent-woman, and return with him to the earth. Perhaps Bailee and Hal-Al had already got themselves into a net of folly, from

which he would be unable to extricate them, and he would be compelled to make the long voyage home alone. He was of an average sociable disposition and while loneliness was not intolerable to him, it was very trying. He could not go long on his own bare companionship without distress, and was inclined to believe that those who did, with few exceptions, ate too much of their own liver to be healthy, or at least happy.

"Come," he urged Jaquet. "Help me unload these dead crystallized girls from the plane, and return them where you got them. They are not paintings nor jewels, man, but dead women, and the inhabitants of this planet may hope that by the advancement of science they may some day be able to resurrect their dead, and so have preserved them in that hope. Or, for all we know, they may not be dead, but were crystallized alive, and these inhabitants already have the science to resurrect them at will. At least respect the feeling of the living for their dead, if you do not respect the dead."

"I have forgotten where I gathered them," replied Jaquet. "Some here, some there, but all from the bright waters. Take them back with you to the earth and show the earth how beautiful death can be made. Every dead a jewel, every lost love an everlasting possession of crystal. The earth preserves the voices of the dead, and their pictures, but here are the dead themselves. No closed, cold tomb; but the individual form of individual love. What a noble planet we have chanced upon! How rich in pleasure, how void of care! How thoughtless, where thought were only sorrow! How virtuous, not to make cold virtue its gladless quest!"

"Have they no towns or cities?" inquired Davidson.

"I came on several cities of men with pig-serpent heads," replied Jaquet. "And also on a city of forbidden ladies."

"Girl-harpies, that drink your blood," nodded Davidson.

"Mere milk-and-moonshine girls!" exclaimed Jaquet. "But these women of The City of Forbidden Ladies—they are as terrible as they are surpassingly beautiful!" He would discover no more, either because he had chanced on some city of unholy women whose profligacy had shocked even his too liberal mind, or because he was fabricating the whole business, and his best lie was silence.

"Is this city very distant?" inquired Davidson, recalling Bailee and Hal-Al, and fearing that they might have come on danger or death from that quarter.

"I kept no reckoning of distance: it may be near or far. Should you come on this city you will scarcely believe what you see for a time, but think yourself mad, and these forbidden ladies —clothed in the luminous light of their own beauty—but a vision of your own madness. But all is as real as the eyes in your head that witness these ladies at their dreadful revels."

"You seem to have come off scot-free," said Davidson.

Jaquet touched his forehead. "Even I was shaken here by the sights I witnessed." He put his shirt aside and displayed a broad frightful-looking scar encircling his body. "Where their laughing mouths ringed me with kisses!"

The little corporal suspected the tale. Jaquet could have been scarred by any of a dozen sordid accidents. Yet there might be such a city of forbidden ladies, and Davidson's anxiety for Bailee and Hal-Al increased.

"Come," he said. "I must be going: I've work to do. Do I understand it is your final resolution not to return to the earth, but remain here and cast your lot with these amazing inhabitants?"

"The earth!" Jaquet smiled. "I have drank that cup dry and here is a new cup, filled to the brim with a sparkling liquor of a most delightful bouquet. Would you dash that cup from my lips just as I am about to drink of it?"

"It's poisonous!" warned the little corporal. "It will kill you before you can become adjusted to it."

"Death has its worlds too," replied Jaquet. "I've many a true friend in those worlds, and if there is a way into death, there is a way out, and who finds one can find the other. You cannot alarm me or turn me from my purpose with that wheel in your mouth. I've as good a wheel of words in my own mouth, that can answer you word for word, and none can persuade me but myself."

Davidson extended his hand. "Good luck to you, and I hope you will keep yourself from too great danger, and maintain the better customs of the earth among these peculiar people."

Jacquet took the hand of the little corporal and pressed it, and in another moment the latter found himself on his back with all the breath knocked out of him, and his treacherous companion winding a cord about his arms and legs, making him a prisoner. For the space of a thought, Davidson could not believe he had been tricked and trapped, but fancied he had been paralyzed by some ray, and the other was seeking to recover him. Then he realized the situation: he had trusted a snake and the snake had fanged him. He struggled to regain his freedom, but the cord was tougher than his muscles could crack, and his enemy's strength was greater than his own.

Stranded!

He snarled in disgust. "Pass me a thistle! I was an ass to trust a snake!"

"Softly," replied Jaquet. "To each man is given his turn to win, and the next time will be your turn to win, and mine to lose. Where's the planet-plane?"

"Find it!" was all Davidson would answer.

"Quick!" commanded Jaquet. "Or I'll throw you to a spider-woman and she'll lay her eggs in your liver."

For a moment the little corporal grew cold about the heart. There was something frightful in the other's threat, which seemed not so impossible on this great scarlet planet with its strange forms of life. But Davidson held his tongue: all was not lost till courage was lost.

Jaquet must have felt that it would take longer to wring the truth from his stubborn prisoner than to locate the plane, for he bound the latter to the tandem of the radiocycle with some cords he drew from his belt and, mounting the machine, began slowly to retrace the way that Davidson had lately come, by the faint indentations of the wheels in the soil and grass.

After some time he came around a wood and in sight of the planet-plane. Instantly he was as erect and alert as a young man filled with a fine new enterprise and, dashing up to the plane, dismounted, leaving Davidson still bound to the radiocycle, to tumble unregarded to the grass. It may be he had never abandoned the plane but had accidentally fallen from it, or in some way it had mounted and drifted away while he was absent.

Yet he may have as suddenly decided to recover it as he had previously suddenly decided to abandon it. A few minutes later he had obtained access to the plane, and the great machine rose and vanished.

Davidson lay motionless awhile and gave himself the silent lash of his own contempt. He had thought to be sincere with a man wholly insincere; he had thought to gather figs from a thistle and all he had for his reward was a handful of thorns. "Well, life is said to be but a play!" he mused. "But I'll be hanged if I like this actor!"

He was still quite alive and uninjured except in fortune, and after a time he succeeded in working himself free of his bonds. He examined the radiocycle and found there was sufficient power in the tank for about three thousand miles of travel, and he still had his automatic and some ammunition. He might yet get into communication with Hal-Al and Bailee and, with the little H-T again in his command, chance on the planet-plane. The two young fellows would now have the best of him since, with all his supposed superior judgment, he had lost the plane; and that too, by trusting a known opportunist. But at least he had not been thrown to a half-human spider, and this was some consolation.

He mounted the radiocycle and returned to the neighborhood where he had first seen the serpent-woman. If Jaquet had not already removed her to the plane, perhaps he would return to do so, or to continue his liaison with her.

For hours he hung about the locality, waiting for the man to reappear, or something to turn up; for every line of communication was cut between himself and those he sought, and he was thrown on pure chance. His immediate business was to keep alive and in good spirits till chance should favor him with some clew to the whereabouts of his friends or enemy, and if chance should not favor him within a reasonable time, he would move on and keep searching, for chance serves effort, since effort opens a wider field for chance.

The motto of the Runner of Navare was *ON*. So when, after twenty hours and Jaquet did not reappear, nor could the little corporal catch any glimpse of the serpent-woman about the pool, he proceeded to move onward in the direction which Hal-Al and Bailee had taken. He pushed the radiocycle beside him, for he had decided to ride only in emergencies.

For a period of time that would have been many days and nights on the earth he moved onward, afoot, through a country abounding with game and fruit, but no creature of human-like form or intelligence crossed his path. Neither did he meet with any spheres. The country was pleasant enough but was abandoned. He fancied that perhaps there was something about it inimical to the health or life of the natives, but which had no effect upon him.

Yet the four-footed creatures were all healthy enough. Finally he concluded that he was moving across some private domain to which admission was forbidden, or it was the scene of some old war or distress of spirit that was so cursed of memory that no inhabitant would tread its soil. Vexed by his slow progress afoot, once he mounted the radiocycle and raced many miles, but still without a glimpse of a sphere or an inhabitant.

He was about to turn sharply off to his right, hoping thereby to chance sooner on an inhabited country, when he came suddenly on a sight to discourage even a stouter heart than his own, and made him ask himself, "What's the use?" But the man who cannot in some way answer that question is of little use himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

Reunited!

DIRECTLY before Davidson, smashed into shapelessness, and half buried in the ground where it had nosed its own grave from some frightful descent from the skies, lay the little hydro-terra scout-plane. He went down on his knees with all the heart out of him and searched for the forms of his two late merry companions. This, then, was their end, and he was poor indeed not to have died with them. Life, at best, is but worth the good friends we have.

But soon his search showed him that the two men had not fallen with the plane, but must have fallen previously to its descent. Perhaps in some merry scuffle one of them had fallen overboard and the other, finding himself unable to swing the plane beneath him and save him, had cast himself after him to die in the same manner.

For hours he searched the country about but came on no trace of their bodies. He returned to the plane but it was too smashed for him to judge why it had fallen. Cooler judgment asserted itself now and he recalled that the construction of the plane was such that had any mere accident happened aloft, it would have fluttered and drifted downward like a falling leaf, and have been but slightly damaged, unless it had been caught in some elemental disturbance. That it had been smashed in this cloudless and windless locality showed that the engine had been left running purposely and the plane deliberately directed downwards. Was it possible that the men had been bereft of their senses

while in the air, the effect of some food or drink, and had suicided. Or had the treacherous Jaquet come on the little plane while its pilots were absent and, taking it aloft, shot it downward like a rocket to its destruction?

He felt reasonably confident that Jaquet had not killed either Hal-Al or Bailee, for to his knowledge the man had never shown any direct maliciousness towards individual human life. His curve of crime inclined differently. The little corporal now encamped on the first hill and, mapping the country about, searched it for hours through his binoculars, till his eyes rebelled and would toil for his anxious heart no more. Then he fell asleep with his head on the front wheel of the radiocycle.

There was a considerable wood not far distant and when Davidson awakened he decided to learn what lay beyond. He had no sooner rounded the heel of this wood than he came on Hal-Al and Bailee. They were again fighting, but not in sport. He hurried forward and slashed a flowering branch between them, but they sprang at one another straight through the branch like two wild animals. They were both bleeding about the face.

The little corporal threatened the younger men with his Metzer but they were too angry at one another to heed him. Then he threw himself into the fight—since he disliked to put the others to sleep with his cocaine pistol—and succeeded in knocking out of them what little wind they had left one another. He was able to pick out the choicest parts of their anatomy, as they were both groggy and scarcely heeded him in their desire to land the other a knock-out blow.

He finally got them well apart and sat on Hal-Al. Davidson too was feeling his own devil's oats. He had lost the planet-plane, and they had lost the H-T, and so between them they had lost the earth and made a mess of hope in general. The whole situation was particularly nasty, and chameleon like, or more correctly human-like, he partook much of the color of the situation.

Finally he got from Hal-Al's chest. "Well, will we have peace now?" he demanded.

Hal-Al rose to his knees unsteadily and cursed Bailee. "The damn fool—went back for more!"

"More what?" rasped Davidson.

"Girls!" half panted, half groaned Hal-Al. "And we had three!"

Bailee wiped the blood from his lips. "I wanted just one more to make it even! Oh, the beauties!"

Hal-Al tried to get at Bailee, but the little corporal held him off with a branch. "You've smashed the H-T! Now smash some of this nonsense in yourself for a change!"

"Oh, the beauties!" groaned Bailee. "And all gone!"

"To hell!" groaned Hal-Al.

How It Happened

"COME out of this madness!" commanded Davidson, but knowing he had lost all authority over the others. "If there were four girls in one place there must be others to be had without beating one another into a goulash."

"'Tis a good word!" grunted Hal-Al. "His brains are only a goulash of garlic and rotten mackerel!"

"Maybe—" began Bailee.

"Forget it!" snarled Hal-Al. "You can't kiss a maybe."

"I passed the H-T a short ways back," Davidson now informed them. "It's soup!"

Bailee grinned feebly. "We were hunting for it, but the fight wouldn't keep. Were there any left among the scraps?"

"I came on no evidence of blood or flesh about it," replied Davidson understandingly. "How did you wreck the machine?"

"It was this way, corporal," began Bailee.

"Begin with the sense of it and you won't have to begin at all," growled Hal-Al. "The girls are gone, the plane's gone, and the little respect the buzzards had for you is gone, and that's the end of it!"

"It was this way, corporal. We came to a great blue wall—me the man, and him the fish. And there was a blush and a smell in the air like morning-glories and roses around your first sweetheart's door. It would have made a sick clam seize a pen in his fin and write a poem."

"Write it!" commented Hal-Al.

"Go suck that all-day sucker I gave you!" retorted Bailee. "We looked through a little port-hole in this wall and there were all the girls you ever dreamt of having, and all the girls you ever wanted to kiss and couldn't get a chance; and all the girls you had promised yourself, when your star came out of its eclipse."

"He lies!" groaned Hal-Al. "It isn't half the truth or poetry of it! These girls—but we musn't speak of such things to an old codger like you, corporal. 'Twould break your heart to set a banquet like this before you, and you haven't even false teeth."

The little corporal laughed in their faces. "Because an older man has a brake on himself, you think he has no speed. Go on; tell me of these schoolgirls."

Bailee licked his lips. "Schoolgirls! I'd like to teach a primary class in that school. But never mind, corporal, we know you've got the speed, but why do you pass by all the girl signals?"

"Let's be moving!" growled Hal-Al. "There's nothing here but talk about what isn't here."

"We came to this little port-hole in the big blue wall," resumed Bailee. "And we were on foot, for we had hid the plane a ways back in a wood in a moment of weakness called caution, but I was for taking the plane with us."

"Go on!" commanded Hal-Al. "Why stop lying; you can't hope to tell the truth?"

Bailee grinned. "Be quiet! Don't interrupt your own funeral! There were no bars over this port-hole in the wall, but it was just big enough for me to squeeze through. Hal, on account of the stale beef below his neck, couldn't quite make it."

"Go on," snarled Hal-Al. "What ain't of you between your chin and your nose, ain't!"

Bailee resumed. "There were four girls walking on a golden walk near the port-hole just beside a fountain."

"You lie!" said Hal-Al. "They were walking on air and singing, with big rainbow bubbles floating around them."

"I'm telling it to be believed," sighed Bailee. "If I told the whole truth and nothing but the truth, he'd never believe me again. There they were, four of them, dressed in a kind of pink cobweb, with assertions of their own sweetness."

"Cut out the assertions," growled Hal-Al. "The corporal has come into his second innocence, which you should respect."

"There they were," resumed Bailee, groaning. "Singing among the shining fountains of bubbles! Oh, the beauties! the beauties!"

"You must have come to the City of Forbidden Ladies," nodded Davidson.

" 'Tis a good name," said Bailee. "They must be forbidden, for no real man could do a day's work again after seeing one of them. He'd be talking with his hands as well as his mouth, to tell you about her sweetness, and couldn't work but with his feet."

HAL-AL turned over with a groan and bit at the grass.

"There were four of them!" Bailee bit at the scarlet grass himself, and spit it out. "And I choose the two left ones and Hal choose the two right ones, and we shot them in their sweet limbs with our Metzers and waited for the sleep."

"You cads!" rasped Davidson.

"Nothing doing on that wire!" retorted Bailee. "We were men wanting our Jills, and Jack shall have Jill, blow fair or foul. It's all in the law of the pursuit of happiness, the first law and last law and only law; and all who talk of other laws but do so for their own better pursuit of happiness. What, don't you know that the true meaning of life is to kiss all the pretty girls, and fight all the bold lads, and keep a merry heart till Wop, the Worm, gets you?"

"If I were big enough I'd thrash you both for daring to presume on the hospitality of this county by kidnapping its ladies!" glared the little corporal.

Bailee grinned. "Don't you thrash me, mister, for I'm growing bigger every day and you're growing smaller."

"Go on with your story," said Davidson, laughing under his ragged mustache at the wholly natural young fellow, whose passions, while not refined by any large culture, were yet wholesome with sheer health and youth.

("Then the sleep came on the four girls," resumed Bailee, "and I crawled through the little port-hole and passed Hal two girls and followed with one, being alarmed before I could get a good hold on the other. We returned to the plane and had a few words over this other girl, Hal talking about as sensible as a pink baboon.

"I went back and had to delay a bit before the coast was clear and Hal came on, to look me up, and before I could get the fourth girl a crowd of other girls came dancing towards where she was sleeping, and we made back to the plane to talk it over with our hands, and when we got there, there we both were, and that's all there was there—a man and a fish. The plane was gone and the girls were gone, and we came on fighting and hunting for the girls and plane, and we've been coming on ever since fighting and hunting for the girls and the plane.

"We feared the girls had awakened from the sleep, being more fairies than girls, and not so subject to the cocaine, and had started the plane, and as we had set the combination so that the plane would run and not fly, we hoped to come on it somewhere before long, caught among the trees or tall grass. But the nut of hope isn't all that the poets crack it up to be. Sometimes it's got more worms in it than nuttiness. Like Hal."

Davidson broke the news that he had lost the planet-plane, and added that no doubt Jaquet had seen the little H-T where the men had left it with the three girls aboard, and had installed the girls in the planet-plane and sent the little hydro-terra to its destruction.

" 'Tis best!" said Hal-Al. "The girls might have got killed if they had managed to start the H-T. I'll kill that snake Jaquet for kissing them, but I'll put a nice headstone over his grave afterwards for saving them."

"You'll never find that snake to scotch him," sighed Bailee. "The curses of a just saint wouldn't harm him. He'd paint 'em green and pass 'em off for good money."

Davidson now suggested that they keep back over the same way that they had recently come and spy on the Forbidden City, to learn if the man Jaquet was anywhere about the locality.

At his suggestion of returning to the Forbidden City, Hal-Al and Bailee winked openly at one another, then began to rub the little corporal's ears pretty hard with the rough knuckles of their wit. But he let them rub, only faintly protesting that it was not the girls of the city he wished to spy on, but the man Jaquet. He saw that it would sooner cement their friendship to have him to pick on than to have one another, and he had no petty vanity for which he would sacrifice good policy.

He persuaded them to accompany him and look over the wreck of the H-T, to consider if anything could be done with it. It was hopeless for its original purposes, but they managed to assemble sufficient parts to make a sidecar for the radiocycle, in which to carry one of their party, as well as some salvaged supplies. Forty pounds of solidified radiolite * was saved from the debris, and, altogether Davidson felt they had practiced a little coup on calamity.

The City of Forbidden Ladies

THE younger men were impatient to return to the Forbidden City and Davidson thought it would be more sportsmanlike, and better policy besides, to say nothing about saving their radiolite by walking instead of riding. So he joined them on the radiocycle and they proceeded, their pace cut down considerably by addition of the side car and luggage.

* The radioactive element that operates the cycle.

Long before they came to the great purple wall they located it with the binoculars, and when they drew near to the Forbidden City they proceeded in the cool obscurity afforded by a wonderful wood of tall, graceful fern-like trees, with large scarlet blossoms.

"Just like looking at Hal's brain," grinned Bailee, as they dismounted from the radiocycle and regarded the purple wall beyond. "You are only conscious of a proximity to an obstruction. Now to locate the little post-hole and elope with three handsome girls."

"What will you have, corporal?" demanded Hal-Al. "A brunette, blonde, or such a dashing, smashing beauty that you'll never notice the color of her eyebrows for seven years?"

"I'll choose the girl myself," smiled Davidson. "I'm very particular about her voice, and the way she treats animals, for I'm one. We'll conceal the radiocycle here among this group of trees and the first one in distress can make use of it to escape, but with the understanding that he is to do his best to return and pick up any other who is hiding about. I'm going to climb the highest tree and look over the wall into the city through the binoculars.

"It may be possible that Jaquet has returned the three girls he found aboard the H-T, and is holding friendly relations with the inhabitants, as a reward for recovering the girls. Perhaps if we are careful not to offend the hospitality of the city, we may be admitted within the walls and gain the love of three of these girls without endangering our lives."

"Love, courtship and marriage, mother-in-law, home and heaven!" sighed Bailee. "How long do you want us to follow your idea, corporal, before it tastes sour to yourself?"

"Forty-eight hours," hazarded Davidson.

"If meantime these girls don't function to love and kindness, have we got your vote to do a bit of gentlemanly cave stuff?" demanded Hal-Al.

"Men," said the little corporal, "I am no longer in any authority over you, but just a fellow country-man in a tight hole alongside with you, and because of my disposition this tight hole seems to be squeezing me a little tighter than it squeezes you, and consequently squeezes a little more caution into my head.

"This is a huge planet we are now on and so much larger than the earth, and probably so far less human, that its inhabitants may have gradually gathered into fixed groups, each distinct in their mental tastes, and perhaps more or less distinct in forms of body. The people living behind this high wall may be a handsome and kindly race, of fine culture, and as we would expect them to observe the laws and customs on the earth, were they transported there, we should be willing to go as far with them as we would ask them to go with us."

Bailee grinned. "If culture makes girls like these, I'm out for culture and running strong for myself."

"I'll put all my votes in your basket," nodded Hal-Al. "But I'll hold the basket."

"You are both merry men," said Davidson, "and I wish you a merry success. But remember, if you have nothing better to offer this walled city than violence you need not expect to get and long hold that which is the product of the very opposite of violence. Now I'm going to climb the tallest tree I can find and study the minds behind this wall, before I have a fall-out with them."

HAL-AL nodded agreeably. "And meantime we'll go on ahead and look over the ground at about a fistful of distance away, and among the three of us we should get the length, breadth, and thickness of the dimensions of trouble."

They concealed the radiocycle beneath a quantity of broken branches, then the two younger men hurried off with more speed than caution towards that side of the purple wall lying nearest while Davidson sought out a very tall tree. Keeping to the main body, for the branches were rather brittle, he mounted almost to the extreme top among a cluster of magnificent scarlet blossoms over eighty meters from the ground.

Before him, and beyond the wall, lay the panorama of a great city, but so different from any city of the earth that at first he thought it but a vast estate of some luxurious trillionaire. A kind of glorified landscape garden, composed of a zone of exquisite parks, set with lakes and pools of variously tinted waters, like jewels.

There were broad highways, and avenues, and lanes and paths, and greater and lesser groups of flowering trees and shrubbery, while everywhere were fountains that threw up, not water, nor spray, but sheer bubbles, that floated and danced and collided and burst, till the air was bright with their rainbow colors and sweet with a fragrance that may have exhaled from them.

There were no buildings of any sort, after the manner of buildings on the earth, but lying like pearls of dew on a great variegated leaf, the whole panorama before him was splendid with large crystal spheres, some of which were noiselessly gliding about as if moving to a definite position, but the greater majority were as motionless as buildings. These spheres, no doubt, were the houses of the inhabitants, capable of bearing their owners wherever their fancies should dictate. These people were always at home, for they took their homes with them.

For a time Davidson studied the city and searched it length and breadth for some sight of the planet-plane, but his search was fruitless. Occasionally he trained his glasses on his two companions, who were creeping about the base of the sheer thirty-meter wall, seeking for an entrance. They were as eager as two bear-cubs after honey, and the honey was there. For about the pools and lakes and fountains of this Forbidden City danced thousands of lovely forms, whose feminity the little corporal was assured of by their gracefulness.

Bailee and Hal-Al now disappeared behind some bloom-weighted shrubbery growing at the base of the purple wall, and as the minutes passed and they did not reappear, Davidson concluded that they must have gained access to the Forbidden City. His jaw twisted. They were two fine examples of young men of class C-3, but they were now engaged about a piece of busi-

ness which had little to excuse it but youth and hot blood. Much as he liked both of them and needed their society, he proposed that they should not play the barbarians except with barbarians. He abhorred a kill-sport, but this sport seemed to him all one-sided, which is not sport, but the very contrary, for the soul of sport is mutual consent.

Suddenly through his binoculars he espied the two men come from behind the bloom-laden shrubbery and dash towards the wood where the radiocycle was concealed. Each bore a slender, captive in his arms and bore her so lightly that he judged their excitement had given them unnatural strength, or else the ladies of this Forbidden City were slight as earth girls of twelve.

IT is a difficult position to be placed suddenly on a footing of moral opposition against a comrade, and on such a footing Davidson was placed upon seeing Hal-Al and Bailee approaching with their all too human-like burdens. They would have fought off ten furies to have protected their burdens from danger, all but from the danger of themselves.

Davidson had decided to cross their too ardent wooing, and now descended from the tree, sliding, jumping, falling, any way to get down quickly and safely. He landed on both feet and getting from the wood raced towards his companions. He proposed to tell them that the wood was beset by enemies and they must drop their burdens and run at top speed toward a distant wood to the left, where their pursuers might not follow. He knew that it would be as useless to plead with them to return the girls as to plead with fire not to burn.

Then there befell the three men an experience that would have passed their belief had it been told of others.

CHAPTER XV.

A Prison of Bubbles

AS Hal-Al and Bailee hurried forward towards the wood, bearing their precious burdens, and the little corporal raced towards them, a tremendous wave of exquisitely bright bubbles, of every dimension from a boy's marble to the size of a push-ball at an athletic meet, swept down upon them, shutting out every view but that of their own amazed faces and the lovely faces of the two ladies kidnapped from the Forbidden City.

For a minute Davidson was confused, fancying that they were beset by a million varied spheres, each containing some manner of pigmy engineer, but on smashing at a bubble with his automatic butt and witnessing it burst into thin air, he grasped the situation more definitely. The Forbidden City had buried them in an avalanche of harmless bubbles, to shut off their view and surround and attack them.

(Illustration by Paul)

The no-man shot out of the corporal's hands, like an arrow from a bow and raced with astounding speed for the sphere.

The two younger men dropped to their knees and glared about in rage at the flood of bubbles overwhelming them and delaying their flight, with their lovely captives. They could breathe as well as ever and move about freely, and when the bubbles burst, as they jabbed at them with their automatics, they did not give forth any dangerous gas, but a delightful fragrance. They could but plunge on—into the hands of the enemy, or some trap. Or by great good luck into the shelter of the wood, where perhaps they could climb above the bubbles.

"Oh, the sweet girls!" groaned Bailee, gazing down on the loveliest female face that Davidson had ever seen, so lovely that he glimpsed his own two bronzed hands stretched before him among the bubbles to take the girl into his arms. "The damned beetles would have had them both in another minute!"

"Beetles!" exclaimed the little corporal.

Hal-Al swept the bubbles from before his face, like a mass of clinging butterflies. "The girls were chained with strings of pearls to a tall gold column and two big seven-foot stick-bugs were smelling them over!" His bared arm swept like a boomerang of bronze over his shoulder towards where he judged lay the Forbidden City. "And damn the law that says they aren't ours, since we saved them from such a fate!"

Bailee threw his free arm before him. "I was running this way, when the damned bubbles came!" he panted. "The radiocycle was straight ahead." Seizing up his burden he plunged forward through the bubbles, followed by Hal-Al with the other girl. Davidson came at their heels, holding to Hal-Al's shirt so as not to lose sight of him.

The little corporal had attempted to swallow the tale of the ropes of pearl, and gold column, and seven-foot stick-bugs, but the whole airy bubble broke into a bitter spume of laughter in his throat. His companions were two choice liars, but this last story was a little too choice. They had merely seized on two beautiful girls for their sweethearts and made for cover with them, and told him a tale of saving the girls from a horrible death to keep his jaw from wagging at their barbarism.

Suddenly they seemed to meet with resistance from the bubbles, and in a few moments were able to proceed only with considerable effort. Then to Davidson's amazement and despair, and to the rage of his companions, they found they could not proceed further without extreme effort. The bubbles about them had become almost as substantial and rigid as thick spheres of fixed glass. Neither could they any longer smash the bubbles; the butt of their automatics rebounded from them as from some tough, unbreakable crystal. They attempted to turn off to the right, then the left, then turn back, but found themselves everyway in a like evil situation. They were shut in a trap by their invisible enemy, who might give them no quarter.

THEY were not crushed by the bubbles closing about them like a matrix, and the air still circulated freely so that they were not in danger of suffocation, while the younger men could still swear as freely as they breathed. But this was the extent of their liberties.

"I'm sad for once, and a little afraid!" sighed Bailee, wiping at the sweat on his forehead, and it took all the strength in his arm to press the bubbles away to do so. "Let's not believe a damn thing of it but the girls, and see what happens. They say it's all in the thinking, anyway, and here's our chance to prove it."

Hal-Al pressed back his powerful shoulders and began to roar maledictions upon the unseen enemy.

"They cannot kill us in this manner without killing the girls, too," said Davidson. "And they will scarcely kill their own kind."

Bailee kissed the wonderfully lovely face of his silent captive. "Cheer up, my girl! Maybe it isn't so bad after all to a merry heart!"

Hal-Al began to snarl like a caged lion, and Davidson feared the man's heart would burst with rage, or at least his spleen burst, at his helplessness.

Suddenly the little corporal turned to Bailee. "Put her down," he commanded. "She's not a girl, nor even an animal."

"You lie!" retorted Bailee, not grasping the other's meaning. "She's but fainted and not dead."

"She never was alive," said Davidson. "Look, you sorry fools, these girls are but some form of statuary, some yielding plastic creation of art that you have mistaken for blood in your mad excitement!"

"Hell!" said Bailee, after a little time. "Oh, hell!"

"Let me die now!" growled Hal-Al. "I might live and trust his fool word again." He moved a ponderous but helpless fist in the face of Bailee.

"You grabbed as quick as I!" retorted the latter. "I only saw them first, chained to the column." He put aside the lovely face. "I thought she was awful still, but who would have thought she was not real."

"Uh!" grunted Hal-Al. "And I smashed the face off one of those stick-bugs that was nosing the girls. I suppose he wasn't real, either, but the whole thing some damn work of art."

The two younger men now fell to fighting among the bubbles, and heaved back and forth with ineffectual blows, like men struggling under a weight of heavy loose chains.

For a time the little corporal was furiously angry at both of his companions. They had rushed through an opening in the purple wall and seized on what in their extreme haste and excitement had appeared to be two beautiful girls in distress, but were only a part of some wonderfully life-like work of art, and for this uesless escapade they were now in danger of losing their liberty, if not their lives. And Davidson had thrown away his one chance for safety in an attempt to restore these supposed girls to their liberty.

Suddenly Bailee left off fighting and began to laugh. "A damned statue! And I told her I could whip my weight in rip saws and promised her a seven room flat with perfume parlor in Omaha!" He laid back against the support of bubbles and roared. "And you should have seen Hal whacking the face off that seven-foot stick-bug!"

"Shut your jaw!" commanded Davidson. "Climb on Hal's shoulders, if you can, and I'll climb on yours, and maybe I can see over these bubbles. There's probably less pressure from above than around us."

The Crystal Vision

WITH great difficulty Bailee worked his way upwards to the shoulders of Hal-Al, and the little corporal succeeded in getting at last to Bailee's shoulders, where, standing erect, he could just see over the bubbles, as a man might over an avalanche of stones that had buried him to the neck.

He attempted to climb higher and lay flat on the surface of the wave of bubbles, that he might learn if he could creep forward and escape in this manner, but this feat proved impossible as the bubbles were so slippery that in spite of their firmness he could not get any foothold on them to climb higher. But he had seen enough to hope. The bubbles extended scarcely three meters to his left, on which side was the wood. If they could force their way forward that short distance they might run for it and escape.

He descended and informed the others of the situation and they immediately made a wedge and forced their way slowly forward, and suddenly burst from the bubbles with such force that they fell headlong to the ground. In an instant they were up and running towards the wood.

What happened behind them they never knew for they did not waste an instant to look back, but, reaching the wood, plunged into it like three fishes back into water. Luckily they were able to keep together and continued until they felt they dared pause and take stock of their luck.

"Well!" demanded Davidson, being the least winded and first to speak. "Will this be enough of that fool's paradise?"

Hal-Al rubbed his chin savagely. "It is impossible to do myself justice with words! I would like to smash something rotten!" He edged towards Bailee.

Bailee grinned. "Don't strike me, Hal! Kiss sister!"

"Shall we keep on or climb a tree?" demanded the little corporal.

"We'll keep on," said Bailee. "Expectation in this instance will smell sweeter than retrospection."

They kept on through the neck of the wood till them came out on the other side where they had concealed their radiocycle, and for some hours dallied about in the neighborhood. They had escaped they knew not just what manner of imprisonment, torture or death, or all three; and they had partly lost their nerve for the time being.

There had been something about the wave of bubbles that had alarmed Davidson more than any danger he had experienced since landing on the scarlet planet. How had these bright infinitely thin spheres of mere air been changed or hardened into tough, heavy globes of slippery, dull crystal? Had heavier and heavier bubbles been hurled at them from some kind of great gun or hose, or had the air itself about them been turned to bubbles that thickened like a boiling mass of sap or sugar? Were the bubbles mechanical or chemical? Or was it possible that much of the strength had gone out of their muscles, due to some ray being played upon them, and they had fancied that these soap bubbles were heavy as metal, because they had little strength remaining to press forward? Yet in that case would they not have fallen to the ground in sheer weakness, the bubbles not being firm enough to support their bodies upright?

Finally Davidson came to a kind of half conclusion, which he refrained from telling the others, perhaps because he was not wholly convinced himself. This half conclusion was that there had not been any bubbles about them. The Forbidden City had turned upon them some kind of idea or delusion ray, befuddling their brains, and they had imagined that they were buried under a wave of bubbles, like a fevered man who fights mere figments of his own fancy.

"The next time, I'm going to kiss the girl I grab," sighed Bailee. "And if she closes her eyes, I'll know she's real; and if she kisses me back, I'll know she's realistic."

They were now about to take turns at each getting a snatch of slumber when around the wood and upon them, silent as a floating soap bubble, came a crystal sphere. It was quite large and clear as a watch crystal, so of itself offered practically no obstruction or resistance to the vision. But there was that at the very heart of the crystal sphere which so affixed their gaze that they did not look around.

DAVIDSON heard a gasp from Bailee and a half soft from Hal-Al, and the sight wrung a groan of passion from his own heart. In the center of the sphere, like a full-blown rose in a great drop of dew, was the loveliest form of woman that a man could imagine with all the fervor of first love.

"She's mine!" panted Hal-Al. "Take your eyes off of her—both of you!"

"You lie!" cried Bailee. "She's mine! She came to me in a dream last night and I kissed her."

"Get back into your fool dream!" commanded Hal-Al. "Or I'll smash you! She's mine!"

Bailee's hand went to his automatic but Davidson stepped between the men. Their blood had turned to fire at the encrystalled vision. "Wait till you get her out, before you fight over her," he advised them. "She's as far away as in a dream: can't you see there's no entrance to the sphere!"

"There's got to be," cried Bailee. "She's alive and had to get in there."

They spread about the crystal sphere, examining it for some door or entrance, but found none. They beat upon it with their bare fists, but it was as solid as marble.

"They've blown the sphere about her," decided Davidson. "But somewhere there's an orifice leading to her, or she would have perished before this for lack of air."

"We must get her out," muttered Hal-Al, and before the little corporal could protest, the impatient fellow had drawn his automatic and rashly sought to crack the crystal along one side. Fortunately he hit the sphere at sufficient angle

to prevent the bullet rebounding and injuring one of them.

"Damn you!" raged Bailee. "You'll hurt her!"

"I know it," replied Hal-Al, in utter scorn. "Now tell me so that I'll believe it."

The bullet had made no perceptible impression in the surface of the crystal. "It evidently can't be scratched," said Davidson. "But it might be split with the grain, like a piece of slate or a diamond." The two younger men fell on the supplies stored in the sidecar of the radiocycle and fetched a small but heavy sledge and finely tempered chisel. But they found it impossible to split so much as a sliver from the marvelous crystal sphere. The point of the chisel slipped off the polished surface without biting at all, while the sledge hammer, when smashed full against the face of the sphere, merely rang and rebounded in Hal-Al's powerful arms, till he gave over from a conviction that was despair.

Davidson now sought by speech and pantomime to persuade the girl to come from the sphere, but in vain.

Bailee groaned. "The City of Forbidden Ladies! No use to forbid them—you can't reach them! Right about face, there's nothing for us in the Forbidden City but—nothing!"

"You're yellow!" growled Hal-Al. "There are girls there and we can smash our way to them, if we are men enough not to be turned back by appearances, or doubts. Shall we hang defeat on our own noses and call it sagacity?"

"I'll fight to the last man and then fight myself!" retorted Bailee. "Come now, you hesitating, sweet young buzzard, crack this diamond nut here and get the kernel out, and I'll believe you're worth following into this city with the big blue spite-fence around it."

Suddenly the bright crystal sphere began to cloud, like a mirror breathed upon, and as the men watched in astonishment and despair it grew more and more opaque, till it became wholly obscured and stood before them a great frost-clouded ball into which they could not peer at all.

"Serves us right!" groaned Hal-Al. "We're a muddy pair and she'll none of us! Shall a cherub unveil herself before two bull frogs?"

"She's gone—like a snow girl in hell!" sighed Bailee.

CHAPTER XVI

The Lure

WHEN the form of the girl within the crystal sphere was no longer visible, Davidson was almost persuaded that there had not been any girl within the sphere, but the lovely vision which they had seen had been a mere illusion thrown into the crystal by means of some invisible ray from the Forbidden City, as a cinematograph projects a picture upon a screen. He told the others of his suspicion and Hal-Al considered the matter with half closed eyes, but Bailee shook his head stubbornly.

"She was real and alive," the latter maintained. "She may had diffused herself into frost from looking at Hal's homely face, but she was there herself a minute ago. You go far with your rays—why not go further and say—"

Hal-Al threw up his hands. "Why not go further and give yourself a bloody nose. Maybe the little corporal is right and she's only a reflection in a glass push-ball that these pig-headed devils play some kind of a game with in this pink hell."

Bailee turned to Davidson. "It isn't your lying I mind. Neither the style of it or the persistence of it, but that you expect me to believe it. You mean to say that this girl in this big glass marble isn't the real thing?"

"It's a choice of marvels," replied Davidson. "How could she have breathed in there, without any opening in the sphere, yet how could she have been otherwise than a living girl, being so very lifelike, so absolutely convincing to the eye?"

Hal-Al struck the obscured crystal. "Solid as marble! real as my right hand! persistent as Bailee's jaw-bone! If this is not a big crystal with a live girl inside of it, then it is time I was scrapped by old man Junk!"

The frost over the crystal now began to clear like breath evaporating from a mirror, and in a few moments the lovely reality or deception within, whichever it was, showed as clearly as before.

"Yes, I'm convinced it's a live girl in a crystal coach!" exclaimed Hal-Al. "And damned be he who would unconvince me!"

"It's the real article!" agreed Bailee. "And we'll have to go lightly and not startle it, or the frost may come over it again."

Within the next few minutes Davidson too was convinced that the lovely figure in the crystal was that of a living girl, who had some means of breathing through the sphere, and perhaps possessed the power of obscuring its surface so that she could not be seen. Though possibly this latter effect had been accomplished by some imperceptible ray of energy directed from the Forbidden City. But the little corporal did not express his convictions to his companions, hoping by some fortunate chance of misjudgment on their part that they might yet conclude the girl was but a work of art, or an illusion of science, and not surrender themselves wholly to her dangerous beauty.

There arose a suspicion in his mind that the two girls that his companions had kidnapped from the Forbidden City and abandoned amidst the bubbles had not been works of art, but living creatures capable of throwing themselves into a trance as a means of escape.

The crystal sphere now began to glide away, and they followed. The two younger men were so rapt with the beauty of the girl, and their desire for her, that they seemed unconscious that they were being drawn away from the security of the woods. Davidson's morale was unsettled too.

While he knew he was leaving the wood and the radiocycle, he thought it would do no harm to follow a little ways, and when he gave the sit-

uation a second thought it was only to deceive himself with the persuasion that he must keep his two companions in sight. But when he had gone so far that, looking back, he was not sure he could locate that quarter of the wood where he had concealed the radiocycle, he became alarmed and sought to persuade his companions to return. But his pleadings were in vain.

HE left them and made his way back alone. A man never realizes how far he has gone for a woman until he has to retrace that way without her. After a while he came to where he had concealed the radiocycle. He found the branches scattered about and the machine gone. The girl in the crystal sphere had perhaps been a lure to separate them from their cycle and sidecar.

He made a brief search for the machine, then giving over he hastened back after Bailee and Hal-Al. Only their companionship remained to be snatched from this treacherous swirl of circumstance that threatened to carry everything away from him, and he proposed to save this much.

He climbed the highest tree at hand and studied the country through his binoculars. He decided it was best not to proceed too fast, as he was more likely to leave his companions behind than come upon them, since he was freer than they to proceed with speed. Again and again as the hours passed the same situation occurred: he delayed to climb a tree and search the country through the binoculars, then descending and hurrying on. Finally he turned directly around and went back, he believed, towards the Forbidden City. The girl within the crystal sphere had evidently come from there, and being associated with the city, he reflected, she would more likely linger in its environments than wander on.

He kept on for such a length of time that, not coming at last into sight of the great purple walls, he realized he had taken the wrong direction.

Then pure chance accomplished what his best efforts had failed of. Or destiny, that other name by which men call chance, when they are emotionally impressed. He came suddenly on Hal-Al, seated on a rock with his hand to his head, muttering incoherently to himself. His face was as gnarled and sunken with some great despair as a dry root. His clothes were torn from his chest and nowhere else, and Davidson concluded they had been torn by the man's hands and not by brambles or an enemy.

He talked of such things that the little corporal put him to sleep with a split cocaine pellet. Then, after he had awakened, got out of him that he had killed Bailee. At first Davidson thought his companion was still irresponsible, and some more hours of sleep might so reduce his fever that he could get an authentic communication from him. But what he thought to be the ravings of fever appeared to be the situation itself. Hal-Al had killed his friend Bailee in a jealous dispute over the girl in the crystal sphere.

They had both hit bottom together and fallen upon each other like two brutes to possess the female, and the physically stronger brute had overcome the weaker. But it seemed that Hal-Al had not possessed the girl, neither by her consent nor force, for on the death of Bailee the frost had obscured the sphere till her form could not be seen, then slowly the great crystal had turned black, and Hal-Al had fled, leaving his dead friend lying before the great black sphere in a wood of tall fern-like trees.

Davidson questioned Hal-Al if he had returned and buried Bailee, or returned at all to the scene. But Hal-Al hadn't or, if he had, he didn't know. He had sought to return but at such times he had always found himself coming *from* the wood instead of going into the wood. His reason must have lapsed on each occasion that he had set foot among the fern-like trees to revisit the scene of dead friendship.

He had struck Bailee with a piece of branch that he had seized up in sudden, jealous fury; and the next instant would have given his own life, and the girl to boot, to have undone the deed. "But it's done!" he groaned. "And I'm too tough to break myself!"

The Search for the Dead

DAVIDSON could not find Hal-Al's automatic on him and its loss had no doubt saved the young fellow from suicide. But later the little corporal stumbled on the weapon lying on the ground and slipped it into his own pocket, saying nothing to the other at the time.

"Hold on," the little corporal advised." Don't go trying to shake the life out of yourself till we look into this matter further. I've handled some of that fern timber and it would stun but hardly kill. There's a pulpy core at its center and I'll not be sure Bailee is dead till I examine his body, and then—"

"And then!" groaned Hal-Al, with his eyes looking away as if he was looking down all eternity, and saw no peace.

"And then we'll bury his body," said the little corporal, "and come out of the wood, and not do such a fool thing again."

"There won't be any next time!" groaned the other. "I'll never have another pal!"

The little corporal got Hal-Al to accompany him, and the latter would stand just outside of every wood and mark time, like a man standing on burning coals, while Davidson went into the wood and searched for the body of their dead friend, and for the black crystal sphere. Finally they came to the wood where the deed had been done, for Davidson found Bailee's cap lying on the ground, and nearby some earth clotted with blood. But the man's body was not about, nor the crystal sphere.

A little further among the trees he found a blood stained handkerchief done into a toque, and as Hal-Al had been deep enough into hell and sufficiently punished for his rash deed, Davidson hurried from the wood and showed his companion the handkerchief, informing him that he had

found it some distance beyond where Bailee evidently had been attacked.

The younger man communed as with himself. "It's his left handed knot, and it was further on in the wood. He didn't drop it there before I hit him, for he had on that cap he got from the smashed H-T. It must have fallen from his head *after* I left him." Hal-Al's broad shoulders sprang back, like a man released from carrying his own coffin. "Then the damn cheese-grater isn't dead!" he growled.

"No; he probably went on to search for the girl in the crystal sphere, and may be kissing her at this moment."

Hal-Al came wholly from his formed crushed mood like a bear from under a rock. "Damn him!" he roared. "I'll muss him up again!"

"I haven't the least doubt of it, if we can find him, or he hasn't since died of his injury," replied Davidson. "If the girl abandoned him, he may have become conscious for the first time that the blow you gave him was hard enough to kill a man, and so has laid down and died."

The mention of death sobered Hal-Al, but the extreme tension was removed from his mind and heart, both of which had been too greatly overwrought with remorse. Evidently he had turned Bailee over, and looking into his glazed eyes, had mistaken unconsciousness for death, and fled in a panic. Or else the injured man had assumed death as a trick to alarm his friend, that the latter might abandon the pursuit of the girl in the crystal, and leave the field clear. Afterwards, remorse and loneliness had wrought Hal-Al into a fever, perhaps superinduced by his blood being overheated with passion, and the lack of proper food.

They now went shouting through the wood for the missing man but came on no further evidence of him, and much of the old misery came back upon their hearts lest Bailee had died of his injuries.

Suddenly Hal-Al leaned against a tree and groaned. "I've got to go back to hell!"

Davidson sought to cheer his companions with some rude phrases that would get at his simple, blunt nature more direct than any of those platitudes of submission to the unalterable that make a virtue of resignation. He even cursed him roundly, till he realized it would be better to say nothing at all. If silence was not very consoling it at least was wholly sincere, and the deeper another feels the more sincere must consolation be to reach him.

They moved on in silence through the wood, and like Cain, Hal-Al was again shut out from the face of peace, and his grief seemed more than he could bear. Then suddenly, ahead of them, clear as the sweet old bell of the English language could ring out the words, came the song of *Annie Laurie*.

CHAPTER XVII

Bailee's Story

AS the sound of the old familiar song reached them, the little corporal and Hal-Al stopped like men jolted into stone and stared at one another. Then the sweat of tears rolled in two great beads down Hal-Al's cheeks.

"The damn son of a gun!" he sobbed. "I'll have to smash him again!"

Davidson gave a shout and the song ceased. Then Hal-Al's voice boomed out the name of the friend he thought he had killed, and back came a familiar answering call.

In a few moments they met, and Hal-Al and Bailee shifted their delight at again coming together from the quicksand of sentiment to the solid ground of a cheerful fight. When they had succeeded in giving one another a bloody nose, and considerable bruised cuticle, they were once more on a secure footing of wholesome animalism, and began their usual rough banter.

"You lie before you speak," rumbled Hal-Al, "if you are going to say you saw the girl again in the crystal after I jolted you out."

Bailee grinned. "In a little while after you left us we came to a sparkling pool in the woods, and this girl stepped for the first time from her crystal coach and gave me to understand that she wished to take a bath, and would I please wait until she was through."

"You lie!" growled Hal-Al. "But what's the use of checking you in one lie when you have another and greater one ready on your lips."

"For a moment I had her in my arms," continued Bailee. "But her woman's tears drowned out my manly courage, and so I stood looking the other way, at attention, while she had her bath."

"You lie again!" roared Hal-Al. "The nearest you came to her was to lay your soiled fist on her crystal coach."

"If I had not the fact, can't you allow me the fancy?" demanded Bailee. "Such fancies as never filtered through your thick, muddy skull."

"It never was cracked," retorted Hal-Al. "So the light within never shines out. But you're like one of these little glow worms; you shine most of the time, but your shine is more smell than light."

"Better a smelly light without than a smelly darkness within!" grinned Bailee. "Then we came to another sparkling pool."

"And I suppose you took a bath yourself," growled Hal-Al. "If you did, it took all the sparkle out of that pool."

Bailee resumed. "The water was so cool and refreshing as distilled dew. And as I lay floating at full length on the surface of the pool, looking up at the blue glimpses of the sky, with the sweet birds singing overhead on the swaying boughs—"

"Birds!" roared Hal-Al. "Birds! There you spring the frame of your lie! There isn't a bird on this planet but one plucked buzzard, and that's you!"

"There are exceptions to every rule, since all things are possible to a good liar," retorted Bailee. "And all the exceptions had got together in the trees over this pool where I lay floating at full length, and they were singing sweeter than a Hebrew nightingale in golden harvest time, when all of a sudden I began slowly—" he paused.

"GO on!" commanded Hal-Al. "It can't be possible that you should hesitate for a lie!"

"But the choice of them, the choice of them, man! Among so many gorgeous lies the selection is often a matter of some difficulty, but when a man has but one lie and that a plain, unvarnished one, it is soon told."

"If you say you're lying, then you aren't," growled Hal-Al. "There's no getting the truth out of you."

"Then we came to a third sparkling pool," resumed Bailee. "And she having bathed in the first pool and I in the second, what remained for us to bathe together in the sparkling waters of this third pool?"

Hal-Al reached forward and tore Bailee's shirt open to see if he showed any evidence of having lately suffered from a monomania for bathing, but the skin was so crisscrossed with recent wounds that the evidence could not be had. "You've been fighting, and I wasn't in it! You always did hog the good things."

"There was a serpent girl in the third pool," continued Bailee, buttoning his shirt. "And she got jealous of the girl from the crystal sphere. I tried to make peace between them, but there is no peace between two ladies in love with the same handsome young man."

"He welcomes the coming and delays the parting lie," groaned Hal-Al. "Did the serpent girl bite you with her feathers?"

"I'm done!" grinned Bailee. "I can't come nearer the truth than the facts, and since you won't accept the facts how can you receive the truth. Honest, now, haven't I more the air of having dined on spiced serpent girl, than just back from a six weeks' furlough at home on candied sister? Who's got a smoke?"

The others were out of tobacco, and Davidson informed his companions that the radiocycle was missing, with their entire supply of the weed.

"That's some jolt!" sighed Bailee.

"Damn the smokes!" growled Hal-Al. "What became of the girl and the sphere?"

"I had to sleep after a time," replied Bailee. "And when I wakened the girl and the sphere were gone."

"What became of the serpent girl?"

"I slept again and when I wakened she too was gone."

"It's all probable, but not possible since you tell it. Which way did they go?"

"I was asleep both times and can't say. However, I've stayed around here, thinking one of them might return, for out of every three departing women there's always a come-back in one."

Hal-Al scowled. "If you are ever shot while you're talking, you will be hit between two lies. When I left you, the girl was dead inside the crystal, or at least the crystal was black as death."

They quit the wood and went on a ways with no definite purpose, when Hal-Al suddenly came to a standstill.

"You said out of every three women there's a come-back in one. Were there three women, and you left one behind in the woods?"

Bailee sighed. "I didn't tell you of the third girl! But we'll not speak of her, for she passed me swift as rapture in a golden bubble, and the big scar on my chest is where my heart tore out and followed her. She's gone with the best of me and how can the worst of me describe her?"

"I almost believe you have kissed some sort of a girl lately," said Hal-Al. "You taste so damn sweet to yourself."

Bailee grinned. "The past with a pretty girl —is it ever past?"

A Geometric Flood

IN another moment they stampeded with a shout towards the nearest trees. At about one hundred meters distant the whole sweep of air before them, to a height of fully five meters, had suddenly burst into geometric figures, planes, cones, cubes, squares, triangles, hexagons, and endless polygons, and this flood of geometric bubble-like bodies bore down upon them with a roar as of a surf breaking upon a beach.

"The trees!" they shouted to one another. "Climb the trees!"

They went up a low-branched tree at top speed and did not stop till the tree stopped. As it was, they were barely in time, for the flood swept through the grove and swirled about the trees, carrying with it everything not rooted in the earth. It continued for a while to rush by, snapping branches and even breaking the weaker tree trunks.

"This won't do!" cried Bailee. "But hell, it's done!"

"It's mostly cones and polygons now," said Hal-Al, as the flood subsided and its strange composition lay below them to a depth they judged of about three meters.

Davidson broke off a branch and cast it down on the surface of the flood, and the branch was very slowly borne away as if by sluggish water. But the limb was not heavy and had fallen parallel with the surface. Should he attempt to step upon this flood he feared he would sink with his greater weight.

"Nothing doing yet!" grinned Bailee. "My confidence must thicken as well as those polygons, before I step down."

"What were we doing that they should come at us with a flood of geometric tricks!" demanded Hal-Al. "Why are their girls so handsome beauty but for pursuit?"

"They just don't understand what fine fellows we are," said Bailee. "We will teach the girls and then they will teach the men folks. Women are great teachers of a man's merits, after he has kissed them a few times. One hugged girl is a whole calliope to sound your virtues abroad."

"You haven't kissed but one live girl after you

left Xea," growled Hal-Al. "And then she took a piece out of your wrist with her teeth. I'm getting soured on the situation and I'll smash it shortly, if there isn't a change. This is all pursuit and no attainment. Never were more beautiful girls but never were they more unattainable!

He was in a rebellious mood and attempted to fight Bailee amidst the branches. Both were in danger of falling into the strange flood of geometrically solidified air below them, which might have proved their grave. The little corporal now began to crack such a lash of vituperation about their ears that they ceased their fight to listen, and being but great children at heart they quickly forgot their differences, and when he ceased they begged him to continue to curse them.

There was still sufficient heat in Davidson to carry some distance further along the same line of endeavor and he continued to flay them with the cat-o'-nine-tails in his mouth.

"Oh man!" sighed Bailee, after he had ceased. "What great gifts some little men are given! A little corporal no higher than bub, but he can curse like Beelzebub! And here I am, a real man, six feet high, leading a little one-foot curse around by the hand and bragging about my wonderful child of vituperation. I must get my curse a pair of stilts."

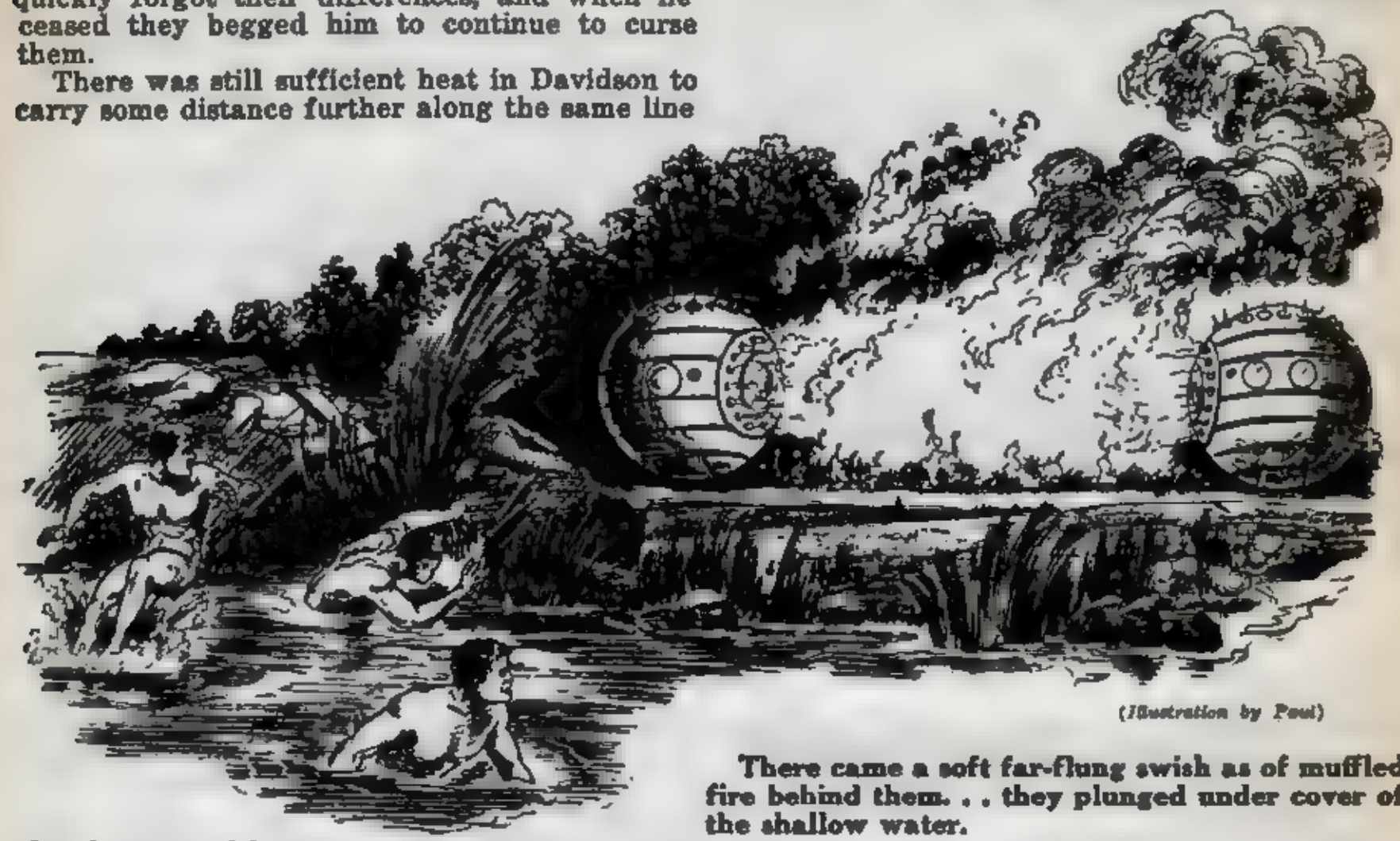
"We had best be planning some way out of our difficulty," warned Davidson. "As soon as this flood subsides and it is found we are not quashed, we may be attacked in another manner, and one even more dangerous."

HE suggested that they attempt to advance from tree to tree, until they should reach the end of the flood, or come over a place where it seemed less dangerous to descend. Their progress proved slow, as the trees were not close together, and they found that all but the heavier branches were too brittle to sustain their weight. Suddenly a limb snapped and Bailee plunged into the strange flood beneath, but he came quickly to his feet and thrashed his way through the geometric crystallizations to the trunk of the tree from which he had fallen.

"The devil take it!" he spluttered. "I feel like I had swallowed a polygon."

"Swallow a cone for an antidote," advised Hal-Al. "Didn't you know that limb you jumped for wouldn't support the missing link between an uncensored odor and a smell?"

"I saw you leave it alone," retorted Bailee, clinging to the tree trunk with one hand and rubbing his stomach with the other. "I tell you, I swallowed a polygon and an isosceles triangle, and I can feel the isosceles getting in its disgusting self-determination."



(Illustration by Paul)

There came a soft far-flung swish as of muffled fire behind them. . . they plunged under cover of the shallow water.

He attempted to climb the trunk of the tree but sank back with a groan. Davidson quickly swung down and gave him a helping hand, and got him to a lower branch, where he had an evil time in the region of his stomach. But whether he had actually swallowed one of the smaller crystallizations, or whether he had struck his stomach on a larger one, was a question. The little corporal poured a few drops in the palm of his hand of the spirits of zac* from a small vial he carried, and after Bailee had swallowed this he quickly improved, and fell to cursing the flood and its perpetrators so heartily that the others knew he was a well man again.

"The dirty scientific dogs!" he raged. "Turn a flood of poisoned geometric figures on a man! If that triangle hadn't melted with the heat of my

*An oil found on the planet of Xea possessing wonderful curative properties.

stomach into a sphere, I'd be the handsome corpse now."

"You just strangled and swallowed one of your own lies," commented Hal-Al, concealing with a rough and ready jest his relief at his companion's recovery. "You had better take the rest of the medicine and lay quiet for a week."

Bailee tried his grin and found it as flexible as ever. "Is that you over there, Hal? Then I'm still in hell."

The flood of geometric figures had fallen so low they could glimpse the ground, so they decided to descend, but they kept among the trees in case the danger should again threaten them. They found progress quite easy among the crystallizations, which now had little resistance or weight, like shallow inactive water, and shortly came to the end of them, where they paused to examine their composition.

They found their outer surface smooth and glazed but, cutting into several, discovered the interior to be honeycombed in miniature of the outer form. A large polygon, for instance, being composed of innumerable minute polygons.

"Just crystallized air," said Hal-Al, as a severed polygon melted away in his hand and left no visible residue.

"Like a dead man's soul," said Bailee. "Gone back into thin air and is just atmosphere, the oxygen being the ladies, the hydrogen the gentlemen and the nitrogen the gents."

"Now that's settled and settled wrong, let's be moving on to where there is less science and more girls," grumbled Hal-Al.

Davidson turned well off from the way they had been going when threatened by the geometric flood, and his two companions followed him. The little corporal wished to return to the neighborhood of the City of Forbidden Ladies because the man Jaquet had so strongly advised him to shun that locality. He probably had wished the Forbidden City all to himself and, if he was there, no doubt the planet plane was there also.

They kept on till sheer physical weariness overcame them, without coming in sight of the great purple wall. Then they took turns and slept and watched.

"What's the use of one of us keeping watch anyway," growled Hal-Al. "We haven't met with any danger since that geometry lesson, and we never learned who sprung that on us. I could welcome a little danger with a kiss just now."

"Go on!" exclaimed Bailee. "Put a skirt on it and let its hair down its back, and I'll welcome and kiss danger too."

A Sudden Antipathy

THEN they fell into danger of a most treacherous and unexpected sort, for the danger came from within themselves. All of an instant they began quarreling. Hal-Al shouldered the little corporal from his path and told him to fall behind, and lead his own fool shadow, which was all he was capable of leading. Davidson consigned Hal-Al's soul to a state of evil rather than a state of longitude. Then Bailee's wit snapped blue and sulphurous, and he befriended Davidson awhile but as a better means of quarreling with Hal-Al. Then he took Hal-Al's part to vituperate the little corporal more viciously. Finally he clotted them both in one goulash of contempt.

They did not come to physical blows, but expended their energy on words, and this alone saved them from destroying, or at least maiming one another. They went at it like three madmen, ploughing up the past months with their tongues, dragging forth every old antipathy, envy, fear, impatience, and shaking the foul bones of aversion in one another's face.

Had their sense of humor not been asphyxiated by the fumes of their spleen, they would have shook with laughter at their endeavor to get at the bottom of the slough of contempt and throw its rankest muck at one another.

All this time the little corporal was swinging his hands alternately before his face as if to brush away a torment of gnats or mosquitoes, till he realized through his strange mood of anger that there were no insects about, and ceased the action. But again he returned to it, finally becoming aware that the others were acting as oddly.

They now withdrew from one another, shaking their fists and calling back imprecations too distorted and chromatic with anger for sober repetition or recollection. Out of his companions' sight, Davidson continued to quarrel with their very recollection, and damn them even to the fourth dimension, and damn himself for having associated them for so long a period.

Then the little corporal's anger passed, instant as it had come, and he stood stock still with fallen jaw, as if he saw the ghost of all folly and that ghost was himself. What had come over him that had caused him to make such an unnecessary and unprofitable ass of himself? There is an unexpected ass in every man, an axis of insanity or imbecility around which the whole man may suddenly revolve—after revolving for years around the axis of rationality—to the astonishment of his friends at the time, and his own greater astonishment later.

Around such an axis Davidson had revolved, and now, to his previous opinion of himself, he made certain oral annotations which would have delighted his worst enemy. Then cold suspicion cleared his brain. Why had he persisted in swinging his hands before his face? Had there been some kind of ray thrown into his eyes that had annoyed him—like, in a lesser way, the reflection of a hand-glass thrown by some mischievous boy—but in his anger at his companions he had been only automatically aware of the annoyance?

He turned, and running back at top speed shouted the names of his friends. He understood now what had happened. He had been separated from them by a ray of antipathy, perhaps that he might more easily be taken a prisoner, as the lion in the old fable got the oxen to quarreling amongst themselves that they should go apart from one another in aversion, and so be more surely overcome by their enemy.

Possibly there was but one sphere in the neighborhood containing but one pig-serpent headed fellow, and the latter had feared to attack the three men traveling together, but considered himself a match for each separately, and so had separated them by playing on their persons a ray of antipathy.

The little corporal continued to run back the way he had lately come, but soon ceased to shout lest he should betray his presence to the enemy. Suddenly he came on a cluster of tall flowering grass in a state of violent agitation and heard the heavings of two human or animal bodies in conflict.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Stick-Bug Man

DAVIDSON drew his automatic and, stepping closer, peered amidst the tall grass and saw Hal-Al in combat with what at first glance appeared to be a great stick insect. But as the former's fist caught the insect's jaws, the head was swung around and the little corporal saw its face, thin, elongated, but almost human. Then he stared at the long limbs and body and realized that these, too, were human-like, but almost pure cartilage and sinew, with little or no bony frame beneath.

The strength of this no-man was great indeed for, recovering from the blow, he soon began to master the powerful Hal-Al. Davidson raised his automatic yet hesitated to shoot, and as he hesitated Hal-Al glimpsed him through the grass and grunted: "My fight! Keep clear!"

The little corporal chuckled with delight. He was going to see a man in any-man's land put up a fight against a no-man. So he kept clear and watched this no-man bend like a split-bamboo pole playing a great trout. Again and again he thought the rod would land the trout, but suddenly the rod seemed to split with a queer half-human sound, and Hal-Al all but collapsed beside it, the victor by only a sheer ounce of superior energy.

Davidson now thrust himself on the scene and regarded the no-man. He reflected that there were queer fishes in the sea of the old green earth, and queerer fishes in the seven seas of space surrounding the earth, but here was as queer a specimen as a man might meet within a year of interplanetary travel. Yet perhaps, as this no-man regarded the little corporal through his thin, mottled, vertically elongated eyes, the no-man thought Davidson was the queer fish and heathen, while he himself was the mirror of virtue and the mold of graceful form.

"He's no fool!" heaved Hal-Al, after he had rested a bit. "He can stink and smell sweet as the occasion requires. He came to me smiling and fluttering his scarlet cloak, and I said, 'Here a friendliness in an unfriendly land!' and I walked up to him and offered to shake hands. Then he whipped the cloak about my head and started with me towards the big pink sphere over there among the pink ferns. But he got no further than the brilliant idea, for I dumped myself all over his anatomy, and between us we worked our way up here among the grass, catch-as-catch-can and the devil catch the loser."

"Where's Bailee?" questioned Davidson.

Hal-Al gave a half shame-faced look. "We split company about a quarter of a mile back, and he went off on a hot trot as if the ground about me burnt his feet. What the deuce came over the three of us all of a sudden to forget three years in three seconds?"

Davidson offered his own conclusions for what they were worth, and Hal-Al indorsed them by nodding his head soberly. Then he pointed at the no-man who was now seated with his thin knees drawn up and his thin head resting on them, a picture of defeat and shame and demanded: "What are you going to make of impossibilities that it's impossible to deny the evidence of, and there's the impossibility and the evidence you can't deny."

"He's a queer chap," smiled Davidson. "But what if he does look like a stick-bug, don't we look like two unshaved babboons? Don't kill him! Maybe he'll serve us, now you've got the best of him."

Hal-Al shook his head decisively. "I won't kill this snake, but I'll have no snake for a servant, for he'll make himself the master again through his services."

Davidson looked about him anxiously. "We must find Bailee. No doubt he has recovered from the effects of the antipathy ray, and is seeking us. However, we should bind this fellow, so that he can't return to his sphere and play that ray on us again, if he was the one who did the mischief."

The little corporal drew his pocket whistle and shrilled for Bailee, and after a time he believed he heard an answering call, but so faintly that he could scarcely decide whether it was hope or realization. He repeated the call a number of times and finally, by this slender thread of sound, drew their absent companion back to them.

BAILEE grinned like old times. "And how's the meek little fellow from amen's pew?" he demanded.

"Speaking of me?" growled Hal-Al.

"Speaking of thee, little one."

"Forget it!" retorted Hal-Al. "This stricture here threw a spark into our antipathy tanks and we blew up—that's all!" He pointed at the no-man, who still remained in his posture of despair, if not submission.

Bailee had not yet noted the presence of this fourth party, huddled on the ground behind Hal-Al, and resembling more a collection of dry, white branches than a creature of motion and intelligence.

"A stick-bug!" he exclaimed. "Then those two girls we left among the bubbles were real, if the stick-bugs were real!" He threw up his hands in disgust. "And I threw away a perfectly good girl!"

"They played possum and we were a bit excited," growled Hal-Al.

"The next time I get hold of a girl, I'm going

to hang on to her, if she's only marble!" affirmed Bailee.

"Perhaps we had better try to make friends with this fellow," suggested Davidson. "We have made enough enemies to stave off the ennui."

"He's mine," said Hal-Al. "I broke his spirit, but you may have him for a gift. Perhaps you can train him to carry your tooth-brush, if you ever have another tooth-brush."

"Very well,' agreed Davidson. He fetched the no-man's garment which lay not far away on the grass. It was a narrow scarlet toga, of exquisite fineness, warm and light and soft as ermine, yet evidently not a skin but an artificial creation.

He placed the garment upon the no-man's shoulder.

The no-man rose slowly and drawing the garment closer about him pointed to the left with both hands, then suddenly sank down at Davidson's feet with a kind of gasp.

"He's hurt!" exclaimed the little corporal. "Let's get him back to his sphere and maybe he'll repay us liberally for our pains."

"Isn't hope wonderful!" grinned Bailee. "It sees gratitude in snakes and magnanimity in crocodiles, not to mention the teasing, tantalizing trait of tender tears in the laughing hyena."

"I'll take a chance with hope," smiled Davidson. He helped the no-man to his feet and aided the latter in the direction he had pointed, for Davidson had caught a glimpse of a sphere amidst the scarlet growth.

Suddenly the no-man shot out of the little corporal's hands like an arrow from a bow and raced with astonishing speed towards the scarlet sphere. Evidently he had tricked them into the belief that he was injured, that he might gain the immediate neighborhood of the sphere, and then seek to escape without the risk of a long pursuit. The act was more cunning than treachery on his part for he owed the three men no fealty; he was merely a fox that had escaped the hounds, a fish that had escaped the fisherman.

Hal-Al gave a grunt, which was followed by the low, smothered whoof of his automatic. But luck was with the no-man for the bullet missed and there were no other charges in the weapon. Davidson and Hal-Al rushed, muttering curses, in pursuit of their late captive, with Bailee but a pace behind. But their quarry though a kind of man, was of an essentially different physical nature, capable of greater speed, and before they had covered half the short distance to the sphere he had re-entered it, and the sphere glided away too swiftly for pursuit.

"He's scared, anyway!" commented Bailee, and drawing his automatic he sent a shot after the sphere, against which it rang with a peculiar distinct clearness.

"We must get away from here quickly," advised Davidson, after Hal-Al had joined them. "This fellow hasn't shown us his heels to carry any good report of us to his own kind."

"My hand was a little unsteady from the fight I had with him," growled Hal-Al. "Or I'd have brought him down like a rabbit."

"The son of a yellow streak!" suddenly exclaimed Bailee. "It was 4-X-Olite!"

"4-X-Olite!" repeated Hal-Al, for his friend had named the most valuable substance known to man, a few grains of which would add fifty years to any man's life.

"The whole damn sphere!" groaned Bailee. "Did you hear it ring when I hit it with my automatic and notice the peculiar color of it?"

The Air Afire!

THE two young fellows stared at one another as two penniless adventurers on an island might stare at one another upon realizing that the whole island beneath their feet was pure gold.

"The color," continued Bailee. "That scarlet! Then the ring of it! I rang the great Dalton consignment of sheet 4-X-Olite at the Borneo Basic with my automatic, and got hell for it. But hell pays on its bonds—in time!"

"This whole planet is scarlet," nodded Davidson. "It's chief element may be crude 4-X-Olite."

"The sweet girls die!" groaned Bailee. "And turn their bodies into crystal and call that immortality. And they might live—young—forever—with a planet of 4-X-Olite under their feet."

"Perhaps the snake men know," said Hal-Al, "or the snake women. And keep it from the others, to use for themselves. But what of it? We can't get back to the earth with any of it, and we mayn't be able while here to extract the salts of it for our personal use. Let's forget it and keep moving!"

"On!" exclaimed Davidson. "It is the motto of the Runners of Navare. The greatest word of the greatest lodge."

"But the girls!" sighed Bailee. "The sweet girls! They walk under the crystal waters and perish, to keep from withering into age, and here is the scarlet metal of everlasting youth going to waste to make the coach of a stick-bug! The damned inconsistency of the consistency of it!"

"It may be the same with us on the earth," mused the little corporal. "There may be some material there as common as mud that would give us all perpetual youth, and some wanderer from this planet might learn of it but die before he could tell us of it. After all, knowledge is about all that's worth searching for, for with perfect knowledge all things would follow."

"I'd rather kiss a pretty girl than know the reason for it," growled Hal-Al. "Let's put one foot before another instead of one word before another and get somewhere on the solid ground, instead of on the worthless whey and curd of conversation."

The little corporal promptly led off to the right and away from the course taken by the scarlet sphere, as he suspected the no-man had hurried off to bring assistance to capture them. As they went on, he informed his companions that while searching for the man Jacquet he had come on a quantity of what he believed was the quartz of 4-X-Olite, and had stored enough in the

planet-plane to make them the richest of earthmen, should they succeed in recovering the plane and returning to earth. "You can buy Omaha and Chicago between you and give them to your sweethearts," he added.

"I'll buy my old home town," said Hal-Al. "And change the names of all the streets to the names of pretty girls, with the main drive named after myself. Then I'll buy Bailee's home town and forget it!"

What the witty Bailee had up the sleeve of repartee in answer to this fling at his home town was jolted still further up by danger suddenly uprearing itself along the horizon. Since alighting on the scarlet planet the three men had never seen any fire, or smoke, save that of their own making; but now a sweep of fire about seven meters *high moved rapidly towards them from the direction the scarlet sphere had taken!*

"Out of this grass!" exclaimed Hal-Al. "Let's find a clear space, or water."

"It's not the grass afire!" cried Davidson, in great alarm. "The grass is too moist to burn like that. They've set the air afire!"

"We passed a stream back aways!" exclaimed Bailee, and all three turned and ran at top speed for the safety of water. There came a soft, far-flung swish as of muffled fire behind them, but being well ahead they reached the stream before the flame, and with no more ceremony than three dismal grunts plunged under cover of the shallow water.

When his lungs rebelled, the little corporal thrust a hand well above the water and realizing no painful effect of dry or moist heat, came to the surface. Getting the water from his eyes he looked about. The fire had passed beyond the stream and was moving rapidly away.

Then Hal-Al and Bailee came to the surface. "After this I'm going to lift my hat whenever I see water!" said the latter.

DAVIDSON pointed at the two large scarlet spheres gliding along, one at either end of the retreating sheet of flame. "They play the flame between them and sweep along with it like a drag-net. But how do we know the net was intended for us? These may be some pig-serpent headed fellows, gunning out for that noman. Or it may be just some sport between them, or something entirely foreign to our understanding."

"You can give them the benefit of the doubt," replied Bailee. "But I'd like to stow a thick hot brick between the benefit and the doubt, for their benefit."

"They're after us all right," rumbled Hal-Al. "They hit too near us to be shooting at some other target."

The little corporal still maintained his opinion in spite of the seeming inconsistency of it. "If they had been after us, would they not have realized we could escape the fire by hiding under water, and returned to search the stream?"

"They'll be back, then," said Bailee. "Let's work down stream to some place where it's too deep for them to boil us out. I can stand a great deal of moisture but very little boiling."

"Like the lobster," said Hal-Al.

Bailee's suggestion that they work down stream seemed the most sensible thing to do, for should they leave the water and expose their persons, they might be seen, and captured or killed.

But the fire-drag did not return, and the little corporal concluded that either the drag had not been intended for them, or else the enemy was very stupid, or careless to the point of stupidity, to have taken it for granted that they had been killed.

"They may have been stupid to trust to luck," he said. "But we were as stupid not to look to see if any vegetation had been burnt or injured in the path of the fire. It may not have been real fire, but a mere optical deception, and we should have learned which it was, in case we should meet with it again."

"Never mind going back," grinned Bailee. "We may learn it wasn't fire, but that won't prove that Hal could live through it out of water, where it would filter through the cracks in his decency. We must not expose him to the slightest risk, for it's so easy to kill a rotten mackerel."

"We can learn what it is next time," growled Hal-Al. "But there's not likely to be any next time. This clean, sweet fire may have been gladder to get away from Bailee than he from it."

"I'll let you have the last say, as you never have the last sense," nodded Bailee.

After a time they came on a large rock-like formation, and here the two younger men divested themselves of all their clothing, in spite of Davidson's warning that it would be wise to let their clothing dry on their backs, since they were in enemy country.

"I'm no old woman that I always have to hang on to my trousers, like an only petticoat!" exclaimed Bailee, spreading out his clothing on the sunny side of the rock beside that of Hal-Al.

To keep in closer sympathy with his companions the little corporal now flung caution aside and, divesting himself of his own wet clothing, placed it on the rock to dry. "He's a good old sport," he overheard Bailee comment aside to Hal-Al. "But did you notice how those trousers of his came off as hard as an old woman's only petticoat at church?"

By concealing themselves behind a rock and remaining quiet for a time they succeeded in bringing down a small, fat, pig-like animal, which they roasted, and this tender meat, with some fruit from a neighboring grove, thoroughly satisfied their hunger.

"I'd give ten years of eternity for a smoke," said Bailee, with a wry face, throwing aside a cigarette that he had improvised from some dry grass. "Oh for a snipe from the streets of Omaha! Even a snipe from a Chicago gutter would be almost welcome at this miserable moment!"

"How are the mighty fallen!" scowled Hal-Al. "All that remains to us of the joy of the weed is to remember and to spit."

"Every man has got the makings of happiness, if not a cigarette," philosophized Bailee. "But each has to roll his own joy-smoke. I'm going

to fall asleep and dream of a package of the finest."

Hal-Al yawned. "I'll take a little snatch of sleep too, while the corporal watches. But I'll not sleep near you, for you may dream of fine-cut and spit in my eye."

They fell asleep feet to feet, while Davidson remained awake. He felt about as helpless as a feeble old woman watching over two healthy half-grown boys. He couldn't reason with them, and they were too large for him to thrash. He was tempted to put on his clothes and leave them to their own devices, while he set about alone to recover the planet-plane or perish in the attempt. In numbers and unity there is not always strength or wisdom, but the contrary is sometimes the wiser medium. Men are neither animals nor insects, and often are greater individually than collectively.

But the power of the little corporal's will seemed to fall just short of the strength which would allow him to go his way alone. Fellowship was about all that was left him, and he decided he had best hold fast to this. The two younger men were bright and brave comrades, though careless generally, with the pardonable carelessness of youth, and better large distresses with good fellowship than small distresses with none.

He was about to resume his clothing, which was now fairly dry, when from around the nearest wood a sweep of flame similar to the one they had previously escaped, came racing with great speed towards himself and sleeping companions.

CHAPTER XIX

Human Gargoyles

AS the flame bore down on Davidson, he realized that they had been followed by the enemy. He rushed around to the shady side of the rock where his companions were asleep and awakening them without any ceremony, fairly drove them into the water. Each man seized his automatic, but there was not a moment to spare to save any of their clothing. They hit the water as a wave of heat flushed their backs, and remained under till they were compelled to come to the surface for air.

The fire-drag had gone on, and the engineers of that drag either thought they had succeeded this time in killing the three men if such mood was their purpose or they were now in the mood of the tiger, who, it is said, will spring but once for his prey and, missing it, goes surlily on.

"You'll have to admit that we are the target," growled Hal-Al. "They all but rang the bell that shot."

"Don't insult the corporal," grinned Bailee. "He's cautious, but he's open to truth, when she arrives and brings along all her relatives, with a calliope and a brass band."

"I rather think I was wrong before," admitted Davidson. "Twice directly over us seems more than a coincidence, but I have experienced coincidences that were more magnificent and consistent than any arrangement we call truth, yet they were coincidences."

"That's right, corporal," nodded Bailee. "Always keep a string on your acquiescence: you may want to yank it back at any moment."

They got from the water and, though they anticipated ill luck, it was with a start that they perceived but a tissue of gray ashes in lieu of their clothing, lying upon the rock.

Bailee laid the muzzle of his automatic across his wrist watch. "The time, the man, and the gun! What a movie I would make!"

"Not even a shirt left!" rumbled Hal-Al, savagely.

"We're alive at least," said Davidson. "Evidently this is some kind of fire that destroys, with no perceptible smoke, like a powerful acid. Let us move on quickly."

"Naked as a babe and innocent as a ram," grinned Bailee. "Forward, gentlemen of the light wardrobe!"

Under the heavy hand of disaster he reacted as lightly as a cork from under water, but Hal-Al shook a bronzed fist after the distant fire-drag and swore revenge.

The binoculars that Davidson had left on the rock appeared to be ruined, the lenses encrusted with a peculiar green smut. However, he retained the instrument as something might yet be got from it. Their hunting knives were still serviceable, and with the point of his Hal-Al moodily scraped some incrustation from the great rock. Suddenly the stone showed warmly scarlet beneath, and the men decided it was the precious life-giving quartz of 4-X-Olite.

"The joke's on us," sighed Bailee. "We can't make use of the quartz, or sell it, or tell the natives about it, and be rewarded with a magnificent shawl or kimono. And the quartz that you stored on the planet-plane, since we'll never see the plane again, will be about as useful to us as a prize bird-dog in a live alligator's stomach. Button your vest, Hal!"

The two younger men fell to boxing while Davidson leaned against the great nugget of 4-X-Olite and held a solitary counsel of war. They were naked in the enemy's country, with not even shoes on their feet. They had remaining but a few charges in their automatics, and they must soon protect themselves with stones, and kill their game by the same method, with the possible aid of a pitfall. Fruits there were aplenty, but they would become mush on a diet of fruit only.

"We must capture a sphere of some sort," decided the little corporal.

The others gave over their boxing. "Lead on!" said Bailee. "You are less naked than we, for beside your watch you still have a ring on your person. It's little, but every little will help the ladies."

"I'll follow," nodded Hal-Al. "But not in the water. I'm no homesick sponge!"

"Then stay on the shore and start a feather cannery," grinned Bailee, stepping into the water behind Davidson, who had taken to the stream as the best method of concealing their retreat from the enemy.

This retort brought Hal-Al into the water, where an aquatic fight followed, covering a mile. Here a wood grew down to the stream, and they left the water and Davidson climbed a tall tree. Far off to his left he glimpsed the purple walls of the City of Forbidden Ladies. He had placed the city in the opposite direction and had thought to lead his companions away from this dangerous locality until they were better armed against attack. He descended from the tree and frankly informed the men of the fact, and the danger of the fact. But they were highly elated, and Bailee suggested that they proceed at once to the city and throw themselves on the generosity of the ladies for wearing apparel.

The little corporal bit his ragged mustache. "We might as well throw ourselves on the generosity of a barbed-wire fence for a little esoteric peace. We will have to commandeer the toga of some no-man or pig-serpent headed native, if he doesn't first commandeer our skins for his own devious ends."

"Don't talk so familiarly of my flesh separated from my bones," protested Bailee. "It makes me feel too much up against it! Loan me a necktie, Hal."

THEY leapt to their bare feet in sudden alarm. Between them and the river came the sound as of numerous moving bodies, and cut off from escape by water, and fearing they know not just what danger, but vaguely suspecting a dozen dangers from another flood of geometric figures to a herd of wild creatures they took the shortest line to safety, which among trees is upward. A few minutes later, concealed amidst the thick branches, they saw a score of deaths go by. Hateful, squat figures with brutal human forms below the neck, and almost human faces, but toadish and compressed, as if some horror had sat on top of them in their infancy and flattened their skulls. "Human gargoyles, or humanity gone to the damnation toads," as Bailee's deft-pencil of a tongue illustrated them afterwards.

When these and strange and alarming creatures had gone by, and the three men had recovered their somewhat shaken nerve, they rescended from the trees and made back to the stream, to learn if the enemy had left any sphere or any guard in that direction. Davidson reflected that that which was evidently the humanity of this scarlet planet had split into many forms, while on the earth it had split into but two forms, man and ape. Perhaps these fellows were the apes of the planet, for they had swung by with the agility of apes, and with a slight apish crouch.

"And every one had a handsome shawl, and me naked!" sighed Bailee. "The insult of it!"

At the edge of the wood stood a great scarlet sphere. They rushed it with drawn automatics and, finding no one to bar their entry, sprang inside the open door.

"We're as lucky as three picked roosters jumping back into their feathers," grinned Bailee. He found the metal arm that locked the door and thrust it around till it functioned.

Evidently they were alone in the sphere, for they were not hindered, and examining the pilot key-board found it similar in general appearance to the one in the sphere of the bat girls, but they had to try half the keys before the sphere responded to simple motion ahead, for the response of the keys was different from that of the other pilot-board. Then Davidson located the stop-key, and with the power to go ahead or stop at will, they again felt almost masters of their fate.

"Let's head around the wood and attempt to learn what these fellows are up to," suggested Bailee. "Perhaps if we are careful, and with the help of a kindly providence, we can get into a glorious scrap with them."

The little corporal feared to cross the stream in the sphere, so he kept around the woods, but with no wish to get into a fight with the enemy.

"You two might get busy and lace any cloth you can find into three togas for us," he suggested.

Bailee and Hal-Al fell to work on some fabric which may have been the bedding of the squat fellows, and it was a quick and easy matter to lace them with thongs of the same fabric into rude bags, from which their legs, arms and heads protruded with perfect freedom. All the while they had proceeded very slowly along the wood, for Davidson had been unable to find any key or combination that would accelerate the almost dragging progress of the sphere. He concluded that perhaps these squat fellows were allowed only so much speed by the government, that they might be easily apprehended, should they seek to overstep the law. He kept the sphere well within the shadow thrown by the trees, as this offered the best means of escape, should the owners of the sphere discover its absence and take to the treetops to locate it. Occasionally they stopped while one of the men listened at the half opened door, more advantageously to sense any sound or sight of pursuit. But they localized no enemy.

The Furies Unleashed!

THERE was a quantity of what appeared to be dry, pressed food-substance, in briquette form, in a large metal-like hamper on the upper floor of the sphere. Bailee volunteered to sample a bit, and if it satisfied hunger and did not distress him, they could consider it the stuff on which these squat fellows sustained life. According to Bailee's verdict, it tasted better than it looked, and digested better than it tasted, and had the flavor of a compound of salted dried meat, cheese, nuts and grain.

There was no water on the sphere, so they ran in among some tall scarlet, feather-like growth near a sparkling little spring, and here filled with water several large vessels that they found aboard and afterwards remained at the spring, on guard, waiting for developments. Developments followed so swiftly that they never drank but a few cupfuls of this water they had collected.

They were just about to retire into the sphere to make a thorough study of its possibilities as a means of offense and defense, when four of

those squat, human-like figures came hurrying from the neighboring wood directly towards the sphere bearing amongst them some struggling creature swathed evidently in their own garments, for the captors were nude. Their bodies revealed in ugliness.

They came directly to the open door of the sphere, as if they had themselves left that vehicle there, or expected to find it in the neighborhood, and were in the very act of bearing their burden into the sphere when the three men sprang upon them from the tall scarlet grass, where they had crouched for concealment at the unexpected approach of the enemy.

"Don't kill!" the little corporal cried to his companions. Yet they found they had to kill, and Davidson was the first to do so, for the enemy proved to be four furies that only death could turn aside. The toad-men would have made short work of them if they had not been armed with their automatics, and as it was they were torn as by rip saws. The enemy ripped them down to nakedness in a trice with their teeth and nails, then laid strips of their flesh bare from the bone.

Half-blinded with his own blood, Davidson shot to kill before he could no longer distinguish friend from foe, and Hal-Al and Bailee gave no quarter. Such was the fury and tenacity of the toad-men that one of them, with his head hanging on his chest from his neck being shot half away, seized a companion, being no longer able to distinguish his own kind, and tore an arm from its socket.

"Devils of the old school!" grinned Bailee, rather ghastly, the blood pouring from his very hair roots. Then he patted his automatic. "He's barked his last, but he barked up the right tree!"

They carried their dead enemies' captive into the sphere, for long, fair hair hanging from one end of the swathed form told its story of beauty in distress. Then they shut fast the door and removed from the scene, as they thought it wiser to be elsewhere, and that too with dispatch.

Bailee bore the swathed form that they had rescued closer to the circular glass-like substance that allowed light to enter the sphere. "Let's take a look at what we pulled out of that crater of steel cats."

They gathered around and unwrapped the bundle, half on guard lest the captive might prove to be a female of the same species, and if the female was more cruel than the male they might well retreat before they advanced, according to the old humorous bull of caution.

They gasped as their capture was exposed. Innocence, distress, and loveliness, in one perfect womanly form, glowed before them in the half-light, like some holy flame suddenly disclosed by their rude, torn and blood-stained hands.

"Not for me!" muttered Hal-Al, half veiling his eyes with his hands as from a light too bright to bear.

Bailee got up and moved away, but quickly returned with three long strips of cloth, which he distributed, one to each man. Wrapping his own about his nude, blood-stained person, he drew a breath of relief. Hal-Al and Davidson attired themselves similarly, then the latter fetched some water in a small shallow vessel of clear blue crystal and offered it to their guest.

SHE drank, and the offer of water must have been among her kind a token of friendship, for she seemed at once relieved of her former fears. Or else she sensed that these were males of another sort than her former captors. She was very lovely, and it must go at that. To attempt to paint such beauty, with a glow of innocence behind it exceeding beauty itself, would be, with the limitation of words, but to fail miserably, and traduce the lovely original with a crude imitation.

"She's no bat-girl!" sighed Bailee. "The cherubs have lit up the holy angel in her and you can see that bright taper burning! I must go take a bath!"

Hal-Al fell to stripping thongs from a piece of fabric, and offered no comment. Davidson went above to study the pilot-board, and when he returned below he found both of the others attired in sack garments similar to those torn from them by the toad-men, and Hal-Al was just finishing a third garment, which he informed the little corporal was for him. Their guest had removed to a kind of couch against the wall of the sphere, where she remained very quietly regarding them.

"She certainly has about her something above common blood and salt," meditated Davidson. "If we can get her safely back to her own kind, her people may stake us, just from gratitude, to a little certainty on this uncertain planet."

For a moment the little corporal felt his spine tingle, for he had noted a light in the lovely, intelligent eyes of their guest as if she had understood what he had said. But he immediately dismissed the thought as the wildest fancy that hope could conjure of imagination.

Suddenly Bailee demanded of the girl. "Is there anything I can do for you? I am the captain, and these two rude fellows are my crew."

The girl seemed to understand that she had been addressed. She replied in a language at once so unfamiliar and musical that it seemed more like the low, sweet tone of some harmonic instrument than the voice of a living creature.

Bailee turned to the others. "She says she has long looked up the winding future towards this happy hour, as one might look through the tender blue toward a distant, golden star that mystic voices whispered was the star of destiny. She requests that you both withdraw and allow her to remain alone with her fate, which is me. She adds that fate is mighty but love prevails, and both love and fate being in my favor, it is unnecessary that she advertise further for a tall handsome young destiny, or interview any other applicants waiting in the vestibule of time. In brief, she has selected her leading man and I am that handsome, uncensored Close-Up."

With a groan of disgust Hal-Al wound a bronzed arm around Bailee's neck and led him to the upper floor of the sphere. Davidson re-

(*Continued on Page 278*)

The Man of Bronze

by A. L. Fierst

The ways of men are very devious, and their uses of the gifts of nature are a true index of their character. One type of scientist spends his life in an obscure laboratory suffering untold tortures to add just one little bit of knowledge to the world's store. Others penetrate disease-infested lands to study and die studying those afflictions that wipe out their fellow-men. But how about the scientist who under the guise of patriotism and duty will destroy just as ruthlessly as his fellow scientists try to create? Are these two types of scientists different breeds, or are they both doing their duty as they see it? The present story poses this interesting problem in pages filled with excitement and wonder.

NO one who knew young Frederick Vaux, scion of a wealthy family, speed boat enthusiast, polo player, glider expert, would ever imagine he was anything but a member of that class of society referred to as "gilded youth." There is a strange notion prevalent, even now, in 1945, that the inheritance of great wealth automatically makes a man mentally inferior to the young people who, like Saturday's children, have to work for a living. That may have been true in some cases a couple of decades ago, but at the present time there is no excuse for such unfounded notions. Grandfathers and fathers who amass millions by their own effort and ability usually have more than money to pass on to their grandsons and sons. Freddie Vaux, who, apparently, never did anything but enjoy himself, was an outstanding example of this new eugenics.

Indeed, his sporting companions would have been amazed at the suggestion that Freddie had ever done anything useful in his entire career. But they would have been astounded if they could have known that on a certain pleasant summer afternoon, not long ago, when he was supposed to be off grappling with the monsters of the deep around Catalina Island, he was in reality standing before the chief of his country's secret service operatives—in a sweltering office thousands of miles from the blue waters of the Pacific.

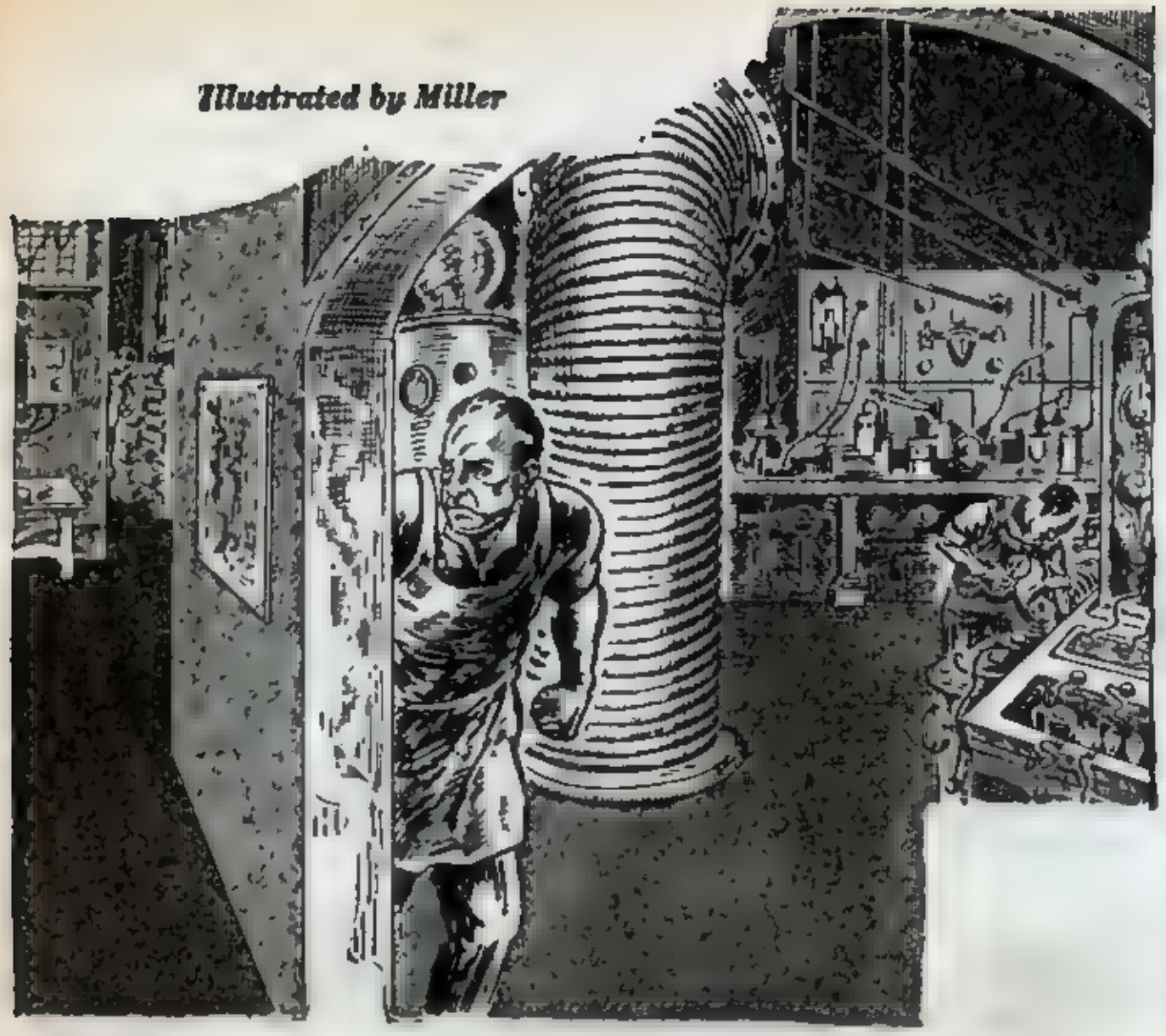
"Vaux," said the chief, "you're a society man. By all the laws of nature and social custom you should have sat for a portrait bust by Franz Helmer, who's making more money out of your friends in the upper crust than your grandfather ever did out of the exploited laboring man."

Vaux bowed his acknowledgement of this delicate compliment to his esteemed ancestor. "I am a personal friend of Helmer," he answered. "I haven't sat for him as yet, but I hang around his studio a good deal when I haven't anything better to do. Very interesting genius, in his own way."

"Very," remarked the chief, with a grimace. "You may not know it, but we have been watching his actions ever since he came to this country. I'm not so sure that all this sculpturing of his isn't a mask for something else. He has entirely too many connections among suspected people."

"But Helmer is a great artist," objected Vaux,

Illustrated by Miller



Vaux decided to take a long chance. He leaped lightly to the pedestal and held the glass to the parted lips.

"Surely you don't think a man can turn out work like his just to fool people!"

"You're young yet," answered Henderson. "You'll learn. But I didn't call you here to argue about art. What I want to know is this: Can you gain access to his studio at any time without arousing any undue suspicion?"

"Oh, yes, easily. Who would suspect anybody with a reputation like mine? Champion playboy of the younger set, and all that?"

"That's fine. Now listen: I suppose you've heard of Manning—Montague Manning?"

"The inventor?"

"Right. Manning is particularly valuable to this country right now. I imagine you must have heard something of his new explosive. A pound of his *Mannite* compares with a pound of that old T. N. T. as a pound of T. N. T. compares with the paper cap in a toy pistol. Try and imagine what a half-ton bomb of *Mannite* could do to a city, an army, or a battleship."

"I'll try to," said Vaux, "but my imagination isn't very good. It doesn't run along those lines."

"Well, Manning realizing that his explosive wouldn't be of any use to private individuals—unless they wanted to blow up Pike's Peak, or something—has sold his patents to the government. At the present time the War Department owns all rights to its use, and Manning is engaged in working out plans to make it effective in instruments of offense or defense. Particularly in bombs and projectiles. Later he'll concentrate on depth charges. Of course, I don't mean that there's any likelihood of a war," he added, with what was supposed to be a virtuous expression on his stony countenance, "but — you know, just in case anything like that *should* happen. . .Well, we'll feel a lot more comfortable if *we* have the *Mannite*, and the other fellow worries about it. Do you get the idea?"

"I begin to see the light," said Vaux. "You think that Helmer and his friends are trying to get the formula away from Manning, even if he has sold all his rights. Their own country—Hisalpina—will then be equal to any of the great powers."

"You're a credit to the service," said Henderson. "Now of course, you know what you have to do. We have maintained the utmost secrecy concerning *Mannite*. No announcement of it ever appeared in the papers. In fact, we made it plain that any talk concerning a new explosive was unfounded, and that there wasn't any such thing. But there's no such thing as a secret. Someone must have made a slip somewhere. Knowing the propensities of a lot of clever people on our list, we have put two and two together and made four—at least, we hope we have made four."

"But I don't see where Helmer fits into all this," said Vaux. "It's natural for him to associate with people from his own country."

"Oh—didn't I tell you?" asked Henderson. "*Helmer has been receiving regular visits from Manning!*"

VAUX whistled.

"When anyone is especially valuable to the welfare of the country, we have him watched and guarded. The president has a flock of our boys following him around wherever he goes. Ever since we decided that Manning was so useful to us, we've had a couple of good men trail him around. He doesn't know it—we didn't want to make him nervous. We don't mistrust him. We have absolute faith in his patriotism and his loyalty. But we have to take care of

him. So that's how we found out about his visits to Helmer. Whenever he's in New York, he spends a couple of hours a day there."

"Very simple," said Vaux. "He's having his face and figure cast in bronze by Helmer's new method. That's the latest fad. No more busts—full figures is the thing now. Helmer's genius lies in expressing something by the torso and limbs and hands, as well as by the face. That's where he's unique. He came over here to do some of our outstanding people, just as he did the rulers of Europe and the great statesmen and scientists and literary men. But, of course, our society people couldn't be left out, and insisted on being in with the really great, so they're paying him anything he asks. And, being a man with a sense of humor as well as a sense of business, he's making more in a week than Rodin ever made in his life."

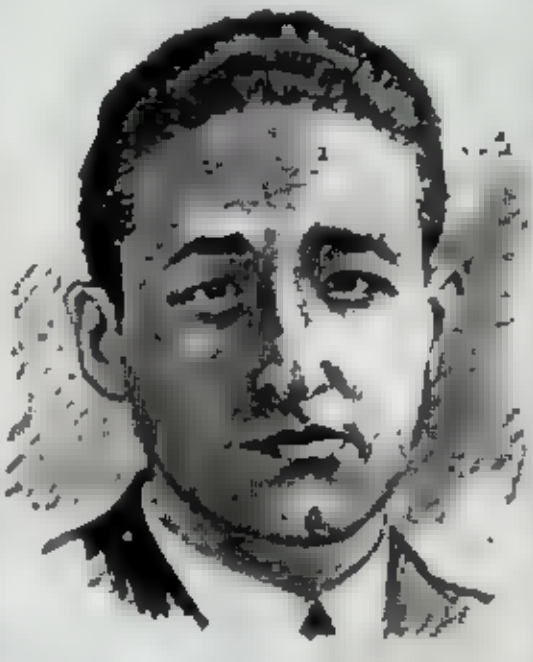
"Yes? That may be true. But that's all the more reason why we have to watch him. In the intimate conversation between a sculptor and a subject, anything can slip out. And we always have to watch out for violence."

"Oh, I see. You think they'll kidnap him, or something?"

"Worse than that. I have reliable information that Helmer has a regular scientific laboratory in his cellar, or somewhere. They may torture him, and then kill him to keep him from talking."

"I can't believe that of Helmer!"

"Your orders," said the chief, ignoring him, "are to spend as much time as you can in the studio, to inform us of every appearance Manning makes there, to report anything unusual, and to look around as much as you can without exciting suspicion. Of course, they won't try anything while you're there, but they're very resourceful. You have orders to go armed whenever you visit Helmer, and to use your weapon whenever you see fit to do so."



A. L. FIERST

"But if you keep Manning in Washington all the time, you won't have to worry about what he does in New York."

"Oh. Cold feet?"

Vaux flushed. "Listen," he said. "I've shot lions, and I've hunted tarpon in shark-infested waters. I've busted bronchos on a dude ranch. I've been in places where you wouldn't care to go. I've bluffed African cannibal chiefs and made them like it. But if you mention cold feet to me again I'll quit right here and now, and you can get somebody else to do your spying."

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," murmured Henderson, who valued this young man's ability to carry off a situation. "But the point is that he has to spend a lot of time in New York, where he has his laboratory. He's a great inventor, not a criminal, and we can't guard him. And besides, the work he's doing isn't half as important to him as it is to us. We're more interested in it than he is."

"Very well," said the mollified Vaux. "I never saw Manning, but I imagine we'll be introduced if we meet."

"You may meet when there isn't any time for introductions," said Henderson. He reached into a drawer of his desk and took out a handful of photographs. "Here," he said, selecting one and handing it to Vaux. "Get this face fixed in your memory, and if you ever see it in the flesh, don't let on that it means anything to you."

A few moments later the young man walked out of the office and into what he declared later was the most incredible adventure of his life.

The Man Kroll

THE next day Freddie Vaux, sportsman, man about town, delightful idler, was lounging comfortably in the cool studio of his distinguished friend, Franz Helmer. The sculptor, relaxing for an hour, amused himself with modeling a little clay figurine which reproduced exactly the finely cut features of the most eligible young bachelor in New York.

"I wonder you're here in this weather, Freddie," he observed. For a man who was counted a foreigner, his speech was remarkably Americanized. "I don't see any of your friends around in this heat."

"Well," said Vaux, "I'll tell you what it is. As a matter of fact I know that some excellent—ah—well, to give you another reason, there is a very pretty little girl I know who is simply working her heart out in the chorus during this infernal weather, and the least I can do is to make her leisure time as comfortable as I can. You know—long, cool, rides in my motor boat, spins in my roadster, and all that. Next week she promised me to go up with me in my little plane. Of course," he added, seeing the smile on Helmer's face, "my interest is purely altruistic. It's just that I'm so good-natured."

"You should say your interest is academic," observed Helmer.

"Or scientific," added Vaux. "I have always wanted to add practical experiments in psychology to my other scientific attainments."

"Your other scientific attainments? Since when were you a scientist?"

"Oh, I'm not much of one," answered the young man. "But I was always interested in chemistry and physics, and I have a neat little laboratory at home. Of course, my friends don't know about it—if they did, I would probably become a social outcast."

"Indeed? My assistant—I don't know whether you've met him—is quite a scientist in his own right. And not an amateur scientist either. In our own country he is held in high esteem. He assists me in my particular kind of bronze casting. It's really scientific research with him."

"That's very interesting," said Vaux. "I'd like

to meet him. As a matter of fact my own specialty is atomic disintegration, or disassociation—I mean, shooting streams of electrons from vacuum tubes at various targets. I get a lot of fun out of it."

Helmer stopped his work. "This is a coincidence," he said. "Kroll—my assistant—is also a specialist in that. Down in our laboratory in the cellar"—he motioned to the floor—"we have what I think is one of the most advanced types of Coolidge tube. It's a development of Kroll's, of which the world as yet knows nothing."

"I would like to see it," said Vaux, with well-simulated eagerness, "and I'd also like to see Kroll. I'm always interested in meeting men of science."

"You shall," said the sculptor, wiping his hands on a stained rag. "And I want to show you something else—which I consider my masterpiece. Oh, it's a wonderful piece of work! You'd swear it was alive! It's a development of my method, which I have just tried out."

Still talking, the sculptor led Vaux to the rear of the studio. Stepping behind a screen, he pressed a concealed button. A panel of the wall rose before them.

"Enter, my friend," said Helmer. Vaux, restraining the desire to ask why all this secrecy was used, walked boldly into the dim room beyond the panel, and down the steps which led from it. Helmer closed the panel and followed him.

"I have that panel," said the Hisalpinian, as if seeing into Vaux's mind, "because I don't want to spoil the looks of the studio. You know how it is, when you have a flight of stairs leading to a cellar. Spoils the whole effect."

FROM the long, low, cement-floored room they were entering came the unpleasant odor of acids. Against one wall, and directly beneath brilliant lights, were several work benches—some of them obviously for chemical experiments, and some for physical. Vaux paused before the most elaborate vacuum pump he had ever seen; an intricate device which made the ordinary Geryk vacuum pump seem childish by comparison. A little farther down the vast, dim chamber he started in astonishment at an enormous transformer, a tremendous helix of wire, wound in numberless coils around a great central drum.

"See the length of that spark-gap?" asked a deep voice at his side. Vaux turned. The man who stood next to him was undoubtedly Kroll, the scientist. The young man looked up at a magnificent brow surmounted by a mass of flowing, grayish-brown hair, from beneath which, as though from miniature caverns, two strangely glittering eyes seemed to pierce his very brain.

But the next moment Vaux observed, with a feeling of trepidation, that the man was a giant; not a white-skinned, hollow-chested man of abstractions, but one who had probably been a champion wrestler, and outdoor man, a mountain-climber, a blacksmith. Kroll towered almost a full head above the young man, who was every bit of six feet tall; and his acid-stained working robe, though it fell loosely around his extraordinarily broad shoulders and massive limbs, could not hide the great chest that seemed about to burst through it with every deep breath of the wearer.

Helmer hastened to introduce the two men, who eyed each other with interest. Vaux realized that, in a physical encounter, he would be no match for the towering Hisalpinian, in spite of his athletic training, his arms of steel, and his unusual skill in boxing. Kroll belonged to that class of individuals gifted with physiques beyond those ordinary men could attain by the most assiduous training.

Beside this colossus, Helmer appeared shorter than he really was; and, though he was by no means deficient in physical strength, he seemed almost puny.

Kroll, looking at the young man with an eye that missed nothing, apparently found him worthy of his consideration. Helmer was surprised. Usually Kroll looked down upon strangers with contempt, regarding them as much beneath himself in intellectual stature as in physical stature.

The sculptor, as he showed Vaux around the laboratory, kept up a constant stream of chatter. Kroll, after a few words, had turned back to his electrical apparatus.

CHAPTER II.

His Great Triumph

AT the sides of the room, heavy bars of dull brown metal reflected dimly the light that fell upon them. At the very end of the laboratory—a veritable cavern—a solitary workman, wearing a leather apron, was sorting more bars of this same metal and making entries in an account book.

"Very interesting," observed the young American. "I envy you. But what were you going to show me?"

"Ah, yes," replied Helmer, with no great cordiality, "I had almost forgotten. But first we shall see the vacuum tube of which I told you—shall we? I know a little of science myself. We Hisalpinians, as you probably know, are known for our thoroughness."

Kroll was quite willing to demonstrate his work to Vaux, who showed, by his questions, that he was quite familiar with the operation of the Coolidge Tube.

"We use here an ordinary voltage of 220, alternating current," explained the scientists. "I step it up to 60,000. Then, with this transformer"—he pointed to the huge helix—"we realize no less than three million volts when the spark shoots across the spark gap."

"Three million volts!" exclaimed Vaux, "Why, that's twice as much as anyone has been able to get before! You ought to be world-famous!"

Kroll bowed, but did not reply. He pointed to a wall of solid lead which faced an enormous vacuum tube. "This lead," he informed Vaux, "is four feet thick, and resists the stream of electrons from my tube. There is, of course, no anticathode. These rays are not as powerful as the

cosmic rays, which I am studying with a view to approximating their force."

"He can destroy anything," Helmer interposed. "If he aims his tube at a piece of metal, an animal,—anything—except that wall of lead, he can make anything disappear—almost. He is a magician."

The young man stooped and picked up a chunk of discarded brass almost at his feet. "Will you destroy this for me?" he asked.

Kroll nodded. He placed the metal on a little stand against the wall of lead. Then he adjusted his cathode ray tube. The great glass bulb, in which a perfect vacuum had been produced by the pump Vaux had seen—or so Kroll referred to the vacuum he had created—gleamed like burnished metal in that dim atmosphere. The giant advanced to the switch.

Vaux and Helmer shrank behind him. Kroll, standing close to his apparatus with the supreme confidence of genius, pressed a rubber-handled lever down—down—until a warning spark leaped from the two parts of the contact apparatus. Then he suddenly bore down on it with all his weight.

The young man, for a moment, thought his ear-drums had been split by the crackle of gunfire. A vicious, brilliant spark snapped across the gap. The smell of ozone in the air was nothing short of nauseating. Involuntarily Vaux stepped back; then, as the three-million-volt charge shot through the tube, the interior of the bulb glowed with bluish light. As they watched, the lump of brass began to disintegrate before their eyes; it seemed to be writhing in torture; parts of it melted and ran down; then the metal vanished entirely. Kroll shut off the current.

"That piece of metal was twenty feet away," he said, trying to keep a note of triumph out of his voice. "How far the electrons will shoot I am not certain. I have not yet tried my rays at a greater distance. When I complete my work, I will be able to produce an electronic discharge equal in power to the cosmic rays discovered by Millikan decades ago."

"And now," said Helmer, "I want to show you the greatest piece of work I have done yet." He kissed the tips of his fingers with evident delight in what he was about to display. For some reason Vaux felt a sudden mistrust of the man. Something unaccountably sinister had entered into Helmer's attitude, with the simple gesture of delight.

It was not the gesture of an artist. It reminded the American of the gloating pleasure of an African native he had witnessed the year before. The cannibal had just returned with his enemy's head. But why, he asked himself, should he feel about this man of genius precisely as he had felt about a black savage?

Helmer walked quickly to the other side of the room and turned a corner into a little recess. Vaux, accustomed to the semi-darkness of the laboratory, was dazzled for a moment by the profusion of light in the niche. The radiance, from some source not discernible at once, played over the most marvelous piece of statuary he had ever seen.

FOR a moment he gazed in admiration. Then a vague, an inexpressible feeling of positive disgust began to creep over him. The human figure, naked from the waist up, and wearing conventional attire from the waist down—truly a curious combination—was entirely too realistic. Frozen on the gleaming metal face was an expression of intense suffering, and all the marks of great bodily fear were visible in the sharply drawn lines of the countenance. It was this face that made the statue different from any Vaux had ever seen. True, there is a great ideal of suffering depicted on the face of Laocoön, in that famous piece of statuary which shows him and his sons in the coils of serpents. But the masterpiece of Hellenistic art never touched the depths of fear and pain on the face of this statue of metal.

"What a horrible thing!" exclaimed Vaux.

"Horrible?" echoed Helmer. "My dear boy, on my word as an artist, I tell you this is a masterpiece. The horror you experience is proof of that. Note the twisted hands—observe the muscles standing out on the arms, as though in a struggle—against something—something dreadful—what can it be?"

"You must be the devil himself!" said Vaux. "What artist has ever been able to stamp on cold metal an expression so diabolically alive? I don't think any human hand can be responsible for this work! The face is too horribly human in its anguish. Who could have posed for a statue like that? It must have been a man condemned to die!"

"Oh, I had a model, all right," said Helmer, rubbing his hands with relish. "He was a man who had loved much—and also suffered much—in a short time."

"Why are the eyes closed?" asked Vaux.

"The closed eyes and the lips slightly open give just the expression I was seeking. It took me some time to get it right, I assure you."

Vaux continued to stare at the statue. He noticed that it did not have the color peculiar to bronze; it seemed to be composed of pure copper. Then, as he peered more closely at the face, a sudden shock went through his system. It couldn't be! He stared again. Helmer was watching him narrowly. Out of the twisted, tortured lines of pain that composed the face, Vaux was trying to imagine what the features would be like in repose. His eyes narrowed to blue slits. He had heard once that artists look at pieces through half-closed eyes, in order to get the full effect. That anguished face—detached from the body—fascinated him. Then, in something like a flash of inspiration, the whole incredible thing was exposed, as in a blinding light. The face was the face of Manning!

Vaux hoped he exhibited no symptoms of surprise. He did not relish the scrutiny to which he was being subjected. Now that the first shock of recognition was over, he examined the features more closely, and with a definite purpose. Yes, there could be no mistake about it. The peculiarly high forehead, the extraordinarily fine nose, the cleft chin, the mole on the left cheek—it was Manning. He had never seen the man,

but the photograph Henderson had given him was enough for him to identify this monstrosity. But how had Manning ever posed for such a fiendish representation?

Slowly the full horror of it all dawned upon the young man. Manning had not posed—this was Manning himself!

"You like it?" asked Helmer.

"You must pardon my first feelings," answered Vaux, attempting to assume his usual air. "It is so unbelieveably realistic that I thought for a moment it was a man, and not a statue."

"It almost breathes—eh?"

"This reminds me of a poem I once read," said Vaux. "It was about Donatello's statue of St. George. When Donatello asked one of the great artists of the day about it—I think it was Brunelleschi—the other fellow remarked that it was a great work, but that it had one fault—it didn't breathe. Helmer," he announced, looking the sculptor in the eye, "I think you've beaten Donatello—you have a statue that *does* breathe!"

Helmer seemed undecided as to how to take this compliment. Then he bowed. "I never did think much of Renaissance sculpture," he answered. "I think you ought to become a great critic of the arts!"

"Thank you," said Vaux. Then, seized with a sudden idea, he asked: "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Certainly not!"

He Doesn't Breathe

THE young man drew from his pocket a straight-stemmed briar pipe, and innocently tapped the bowl against the base of the statue to empty it of ashes. Then, as if thinking of something else, he tapped it strongly against one leg of the figure. Instead of a clear, ringing, sound, the metal gave forth a muffled noise. Undoubtedly it was not hollow!

"This is very interesting," he said to Helmer. "Shall we go back to the studio?"

The sculptor nodded and walked ahead. Instantly Vaux decided to take a long chance. Snatching a small round hand mirror from his pocket—he was extraordinarily vain of his personal appearance—he leaped lightly to the pedestal of the statue and held the glass to its parted lips. Impatiently he waited a moment. Then he glanced at the mirror and leaped to the floor. The glass had remained clear. Vaux breathed a sigh of relief.

"What are you doing with that mirror?" asked the deep voice of Kroll. Vaux turned. He had not realized that the giant had approached as softly as a cat, and was watching him with his piercing eyes.

"Oh, nothing," answered Vaux, edging away as the scientist advanced toward him. "I was trying to discover whether Helmer was a greater sculptor than Donatello."

"Really?" asked Kroll, with a mysterious smile. "And what have you discovered?"

"I'm disappointed," said Vaux, walking boldly past the giant and following Helmer. "Donatello's statue didn't breathe—and neither does this one. It was simply a whim of mine."

"For an educated young man like you," muttered Kroll, as Vaux walked up into the studio, "you have some very curious whims, I should say."

Then he casually picked up from the floor a square of white paper Vaux had dropped from his pocket in taking out the mirror, read the few words typed on it, and smiled.

CHAPTER III.

An Amazing Secret

FREDDIE Vaux left Helmer's studio and drove directly to Manning's residence. As he sat behind the wheel of his two hundred-and-forty horsepower, low-slung, racing car he knit his brows in perplexity; and as he abstractedly twisted his powerful machine through the heavy traffic he kept repeating, almost aloud: "It can't be. It can't be. But where is he?"

For a moment he had imagined a living man was inside that horrible statue; the muffled noise given forth as he tapped the leg strengthened the idea; and he had almost expected to find his mirror clouded with breath. "If it is a man," he repeated, "they must have copper-plated him. That vat of blue liquid—"

Manning's wife herself answered his ring at the front door. She looked worried; and Vaux imagined she had not slept the night before. His name on his engraved card, and his fine features—familiar to every reader of the Sunday society sections of the newspapers—gained him instant admission.

"Is your husband here?" he asked, after the formalities were over.

"No, he's not," answered Mrs. Manning. "He hasn't been home all night, and I'm worried sick. I know he went to Franz Helmer's studio late yesterday afternoon, and I haven't heard from him. I telephoned there, and Helmer himself said he had left."

"Oh," said Vaux. "That doesn't sound so good."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked the woman in alarm.

"It's a long story," said Vaux, "and I can't bother you with it now; but as I know you can keep a secret—all inventors' wives can do that—I'm going to tell you that I was sent to that studio to find out what had become of him. I'm doing a little work for the Secret Service."

"You don't mean—you don't mean he's in danger?"

"I'm afraid I do. You see this morning I received this note."

Vaux searched his pockets unsuccessfully. "Good heavens," he said, "I must have dropped it in the studio! Well—this morning I received a message from my superior with the words typed on it: "MANNING WENT TO HELMER'S LATE YESTERDAY: DID NOT COME OUT: INVESTIGATE AT ONCE." So you see it looks serious. This morning I was in the studio and I saw a bronze cast of a man who looked like

your husband. He was having one made, wasn't he?"

"Yes—but it wasn't anywhere near completion."

Vaux whistled again and looked at the woman sympathetically. "Do you know about *Mannite*?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes—it's a new explosive."

"It's more than that—it means the peace of the world in the right hands, and bloody war in the wrong hands."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Someone may try to get the formula from him. That's why we're watching him. And these Hisalpinians—"

"I'm one myself," she said, simply. "I know what you mean."

"*You* are one? I didn't know he had ever been there."

"Oh, yes—he met me there and brought me to this country."

"Do you know anything of the artists and scientists of that country? Do you know Helmer?"

"I've heard of him. But I know many others.

"Have you ever heard of a scientist—a man of genius—named Kroll?"

The woman's face went dead white, and into her eyes crept an expression of terror. "Kroll?" she repeated. "Have you seen him? Can you describe him to me?"

"I saw him this morning," said Vaux, "in Helmer's studio—or rather in a laboratory beneath the studio. He's a giant, with terrific power in his limbs—anyone can see that—and a magnificent head. His hair is brown, but it is graying."

"Yes," she said dully "it would—by this time."

"Then you know him?" asked Vaux, in surprise.

"Can *you* keep a secret?" she asked, in apparent desperation. "Because—I don't know why—I think I can trust you."

"Most women do," said Vaux, forgetting for an instant the seriousness of the situation.

"Then"—her hands twisted in her lap—"this Kroll—this giant—is the greatest brain in Hisalpina, and a descendant of the first family of that proud country; and—and—*many years ago he was my husband!*"

"What!" exclaimed Vaux, leaping to his feet. "Oh, I begin to see it now! How did you come to marry an American?"

"I'm proud of it," she said defiantly. "Do you know anything about the marriage customs among the better families of a country like mine? You know that matches are arranged by parents. To me, a young and inexperienced girl, Kroll was a name—almost a legend. My family arranged this brilliant marriage for me. Kroll needed money for his experiments, and I brought him a large dowry. He gave me the most respected name in our own land. But that was all."

"ASIDE from that he treated me with the utmost contempt, looking upon me as upon an inferior specimen of humanity. The one true love of his life was science. To me he had dedicated his life, and it made no difference to him whether he had a wife or not. He made my life a living hell. Then came his friend to study with him—the man who is now my husband. It was a case of love at first sight between us. He knew that I was suffering, and it nearly broke his heart.

"After almost a year of this torture I could stand it no longer. I told my lover that if he did not take me away from Kroll I would kill myself. I meant it. So we eloped. Kroll did not miss me, of course, but we had insulted the proudest name in Hisalpina, and that he could never forget. We came to America; a divorce was arranged; we were married—and that's about all I have to tell you about Kroll."

"Wait a minute," said Vaux. "Did you say your husband and Kroll studied together?"

"Yes. They worked together, conducted experiments together, and perfected inventions together. Even at that time my husband was working on explosives."

"So Kroll worked with him on *Mannite*, too," said Vaux thoughtfully. "He knew something of it even then."

"But why has Kroll come to America—and why has he not avenged himself already?" asked the frightened woman. "Always I have been expecting this. Once in a while news came over the sea of some great discovery he had made, and I thought we were secure. But now, with Kroll in this country—"

"Don't worry," said Vaux, cheerfully. "Your husband will be back soon. I feel sure of it. You know he has many affairs, and he may have had to leave for somewhere suddenly. Perhaps he intended to notify you and forgot to do so."

"I hope you are right," quavered Manning's wife, "but now that Kroll is here I shall never feel safe again."

"One thing is certain," said Vaux, as he took his leave. "If your husband knew that Kroll was working for Helmer, he would never set foot inside that studio."

"But I'm sure he's *not* working for Helmer," she answered, as she opened the door. "Kroll would never work for anyone. I'm sure it is Helmer who takes orders from him."

Vaux drove away slowly. "I think she's right at that," he thought. "A man like Kroll would naturally be at the head of a ring of scientific spies. With his brain—and then, nobody knows who he is, and very few have ever seen him."

He debated with himself whether he should notify the government organization of what he had learned, or whether he should go back to the studio, pretend he had forgotten something there, and try to get the formula—somehow. The wisdom of the first course appealed to him immediately. He turned his car toward the wooded hills of upper New York City, where the Secret Service operatives had their warm-weather quarters.

Vaux drove slowly, restraining his powerful motor as one holds back a spirited horse by pulling at the reins. He did not realize, as he turned into a little-traveled road, that a large closed

car was following him. And then several things happened almost simultaneously. A cheap little open car dashed in front of his expensive custom-bodied racer; so close, indeed, that it scraped his bumper. Vaux suddenly stepped on the brake, and as he left his seat to address strong words to the driver of the other car, which had also stopped, he found himself peering into the black muzzle of a pistol.

"A hold-up, eh?" he sneered. "Well, steal my car—you won't get very far with it. Every cop in the state knows this one."

The man with the gun did not deign to reply. He merely waited until the large closed car had drawn up close to them.

A door swung open. "Step inside," invited a cold voice, which issued from behind a revolver pointed carelessly in his general direction.

Vaux obeyed without a word. At the first opportunity he would have drawn his own pistol from his underarm holster; but, covered from two directions, it was out of the question.

The door of the limousine slammed shut. Through the window Vaux saw the driver of the little car leave his own vehicle, clamber behind the wheel of the best-known car in New York, and leisurely follow the machine which was bearing him away.

"This is a stupid way of stealing a car," began Vaux. "You should have picked any car in New York but that one."

Kroll's Story

"WE don't steal cars, my clever young friend," said the voice of Kroll. "We have more important things to think of. Your expensive toy will not be harmed, although I doubt very much whether you will ever need it again. You should not be so indiscreet as to drop notes from your pockets. It is always safer to memorize them and then burn them."

"You won't get very far with this, Kroll," said Vaux. "I'm too well known for *that*. You might get rid of Manning, but if anything should happen to me, the debutantes and chorus girls will tear you limb from limb."

"I like your spirit," said the scientist. "Fortunately, I am never swayed by humor and you seem to have more humor than sense. Instead of driving to your superiors, you should have telephoned. Such stupidity!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Kroll."

"No? But I knew what you were talking about a little while ago—with the woman who used to be my wife. Really, you think very little of me. You should appreciate intellect when you meet it—you have so little of it yourself."

"What I say to Mrs. Manning is my own business," snapped Vaux. "I suppose you've bribed the servants, put dictaphones all over the house, and kept tab on every move."

"Better than that," chuckled Kroll. "See this?" He pointed to a black box in the tonneau, with a pair of earphones attached to it by an insulated wire. "You amateur detectives use dictaphones which lead into another room. You never think of applying the principle of radio broadcasting, do you? Of course not. But I am Kroll. I heard you call me a man of genius. You are right. I can sit outside in my car and hear every word that is spoken in that house. Did you think for a minute I would let you get away without following you? We suspected you all along, and that note settled it. If you were as wide awake as you think you are, you might have noticed us following you."

"Where are we going?" asked Vaux, knowing very well that he was on the way back to the laboratory.

"Guess," said Kroll. "I have an idea Helmer may want to make a cast of you—as a remembrance, perhaps."

"As you did of Manning," interposed Vaux.

"Exactly. I rather thought you guessed it. When I found you putting that mirror to the statue's mouth, I knew why you did it."

"This is monstrous," said Vaux. "I couldn't believe it then, and I can't believe it even now. I can believe it only of a lunatic."

"Patriotism and vengeance may make a man act like a lunatic," answered Kroll. "My main object was to get the formula for the *Mannite*—which I have. After that—"

"After that," sneered Vaux, "you broke your promise and copper-plated him. Oh, I can imagine it all—you needn't tell me. I suppose Helmer offered him a fabulous sum for the formula, which, naturally, he refused—out of patriotism, as you call it. Then your fat little accomplice became insistent, and threatened him. I can imagine Manning trying to get out. The exits were guarded. Then, at the precise dramatic moment, I suppose you walked in—knowing what effect it would have on him."

"Remarkable!" exclaimed Kroll. "You really have a brain after all. And what happened after that?"

"I can imagine. I can imagine you walking toward him like an avenging doom, thirsting for his blood. And why? Simply because your wife couldn't endure you any longer, and found a man she really cared for. Anyone so devoted as you are to science shouldn't bother about a mere wife."

"Don't preach to *me!*" roared Kroll. "I have waited twenty years to avenge my family honor. Of course, you *nouveaux riches* don't understand what that is."

"My family is as good as yours," said Vaux, "with this difference—it's a lot more civilized."

"That's what makes it so easy for you to be a sneaking spy, eh?"

"You aren't a spy, are you?" countered Vaux.

"I," said Kroll, "am a great scientist, and anything that I do for my country comes under the head of patriotism. What are you? A rich man's son, an idler, looking for a thrill. And you thought you could fool me—Kroll! Oh, you'll get your thrill, all right, my young friend."

"The biggest thrill I could get," said Vaux, between his teeth, "would be to feel that thick

neck of yours between my hands, you murderous maniac!"

"PRECISELY what Manning said," chuckled Kroll. "All you Americans talk like the heroes of melodrama. Bah!"

"If you didn't have that gun pointing at me, I'd kill you right now, strong as you are! Why didn't you murder me when you held me up, and settle it?"

"Ah, that would be crude—too much like your own trick of taking people for a ride. And then there would be too much evidence. Whereas, when you are cased in bronze, who would think of looking for you? Bodies buried in obscure places have a habit of coming to light; bodies cremated leave traces; but living men plated with copper never tell any tales!"

"So you did that to Manning after all!" exclaimed Vaux, with a shudder. "After you got the formula, too."

"Certainly. It was part of the method of getting the formula."

"I see it all," said Vaux. "You and Helmer overpowered him, I suppose, and dragged him to that horrible laboratory. Then—"

"I'll finish it for you," interrupted Kroll. "You may not appreciate the fine points of the situation. We didn't overpower him. He went there of his own accord—to give me the formula, he said, and I knew he was lying to gain time, or to think of a way out. And all the time he kept up a stream of talk, talking like a fool to get himself out with a whole skin.

"When I told him the United States was using his *Mannite* for weapons of offense, and that his invention would be put to ignoble uses, and that his name would do down as one accursed among men, he charged me with having the same designs for my own country—which, of course, I have, or I would not have gone to all this trouble.

"And then he even tried to say that he had forgotten the formula, because it was so involved, and that the only copy was in the vaults of the government. I replied that he could never forget it, because as a fellow scientist I knew it was burned into his brain, and that it was not as involved as he was trying to make me believe. As his wife told you, I used to work on it with him before he stole her."

"He must have realized his life was forfeit anyway," said Vaux. "Even if he gave you the correct formula you would never allow him to escape and warn the authorities. You were only playing with him, to prolong the agony.'

"A pleasure," said Kroll, "after twenty years of seething, burning, hatred. I often wonder why I didn't kill him sooner and set my mind at rest. Anyway, he asked me what security he had. 'The word of Kroll' I told him, and he had to be satisfied with that. For centuries that word has been better than a bond.

"Then he sat down and scribbled off a formula for an explosive less powerful than *Mannite*—I could see the principal ingredient was missing. I flung it in his face, and then, in a mad attempt at freedom, he struck me in the temple with his fist. I was dazed, and he ran, but Helmer met him with a pistol, and I leaped on him and choked him into unconsciousness.

"Helmer and I attended to everything alone—we didn't want any witnesses who might be bribed later. We dragged Manning to that large tank of blue liquid you saw—that's copper sulphate solution. I had it equipped with clamps for holding his head, arms, and ankles. I tore off his upper garments, and left him naked to the waist, so that the copper should plate his chest, instead of his shirt."

CAPTER IV

Back in the Trap

VAUX listened in growing horror. He found it impossible to believe than anything so inhuman, so positively primitive as the torture of an enemy, could take place in New York in his time. He had seen African savages torture other savages; but for a great scientist, and enlightened being, to do this to another scientist, was beyond the wildest flights of imagination. He pinched himself, thinking he was asleep and in the grip of a nightmare. Kroll noticed it.

"You're awake, never fear!" said the giant Hisalpinian. "This is only a beginning. When we got him in the tank, the cold liquid, as I expected it would, revived him. He looked around in terror, tried to free himself from the clamps, and then realized his situation. He began to struggle, and tug at the clamps, but they only bit deeper. Finally he desisted and looked at me with fear written all over his face. Ah, it was good—after twenty years!"

"What a monster you are!" exclaimed Vaux. "Compared to you, Nero was a saint. He, at least, had the excuse of insanity."

"So have I, in your opinion," observed Kroll. "Well, when I told him that he was the cathode of a copper solution, and that I could turn a switch and copper-plate him, his memory suddenly improved. He swore that if I let him out and let him get dry he'd work out the formula—I knew it had to be worked out, and he wasn't in any position to do it while he was up to his neck in sulphate solution.

"Helmer and I unfastened the bands and dragged him out, and he lay on the floor, shivering like a dog that has come out of the water. I threw him a towel, and he dried his clothes against an electric heater I allowed him to use, although it was a hot day. Then he asked for writing materials, sat down at a table, and in less than an hour he had the formula complete, and the various secret steps in the manufacture of the *Mannite* outlined."

"And where is the formula now?" asked Vaux.

"Perhaps you think you can destroy it? The formula is burned into my brain. I shall never forget it, and every step is as familiar to me as my own name. That, my dear young friend, is genius!"

"More than genius," said Vaux. "Stupidity."

"You think so? You think it poor policy to entrust one man with a secret so valuable? But that is because you do not, and cannot, know

me. By tomorrow, or perhaps tonight, the formula and every step in its deduction will be in the War Office of Hisalpina. Naturally I cannot cable it or radio it; I use my own wireless telephone, which can be heard at the War Office, and nowhere else; and to insure further safety, the entire formula and all its steps go *in code*—you understand?—in code, so that even if the message is tapped we will still be safe. Probably the Secret Service will seek for me soon; but by that time my work here will have been accomplished."

"So you haven't sent the message yet?" asked Vaux, with a gleam of hope in his eyes.

"I know what you think," said Kroll. "You imagine you can kill me in some way and prevent its transmission. Well, even if you could encompass that impossible feat, the secret will still be ours. I have yet that paper on which Manning worked it out; I am translating it into my own code, which took me years to devise, and which is like no other; and if anything should happen to me, Helmer and the others can take it from its hiding place—which, of course, you will never find—and transmit it, although they do not know the code, and they will have to use our ordinary code. In any event, we are secure."

The car was approaching Helmer's studio.

"You will alight before me," directed Kroll, "and walk directly into the studio. Remember I have my revolver pressed against your back, and I am not known for lack of nerve."

"You fool!" said Vaux. "Don't you know the house is watched by government operatives?"

"It *was*," corrected Kroll. "We knew that all along. But at the present time the men assigned to guard us are nowhere to be seen. In fact, they have lost all interest in external events, and I should not be at all surprised if they remained that way for several days to come, by which time the good work will have been accomplished. Go on, get out."

He pressed the hard muzzle of the weapon into Vaux's back, and silently they walked up the steps into the studio. The door closed behind them, and the young man found himself, for the first time in his life, a prisoner.

"WE are leaving your famous racing car outside," said Kroll, "so as to avert all suspicion. You see, we do things thoroughly in our country."

Vaux did not reply. He was casting about for a means of escape from this maniac, but the guarded door of the studio, the grilled windows, and the thirty-foot skylight offered no possible chance of flight. The skylight he might reach, he calculated, but only if he had the climbing abilities of a simian.

Except for a butler who was very obviously armed, the studio was empty. "To the laboratory," directed Kroll. "Helmer is waiting to immortalize you in bronze for you world of debutantes and chorus girls."

Vaux looked about him in despair, and slowly walked down the secret steps into the great, acrid-smelling underground chamber. As the door closed upon him he bid good-bye to light and life and love and all the glorious things he had to live for. Too late he realized, he reflected bitterly, that to serve one's country in dangerous ways is not the royal road to romance.

"Got him, eh?" asked Helmer, as Kroll prodded the reluctant Vaux into the light. "I'm sorry, Freddie," he said, with mock sympathy in his voice, "but nice boys like you shouldn't play with dynamite—or rather *Mannite*, ha ha! Much as I hate to lose your friendship, there are other things I must consider—such as my own life and my duty to my country. However, I will always have you at my side, as a remembrance."

"No levity, Helmer," ordered Kroll, in imperious tones. It was quite evident that he was master in his own domain. Mrs. Manning had been right after all—Kroll would consent to take part in an enterprise only if he could be the leader.

"You will keep him tied for another two hours or so, while I complete the translation of the code," continued Kroll. "Then, before I telephone Hisalpina and complete this assignment, we will dispose of this spy. When I send the message there will be nothing that will remain." He turned and went off to a little room opening on the laboratory. Vaux saw him throw off his coat and don a tight leathern shirt, leaving his powerful arms and shoulders free.

Then he observed the giant strap an automatic pistol to his hip in an ordinary holster. Kroll drew a chair up to a desk, took a key from a drawer he unlocked, and with this key opened still another lock—one which remained invisible to Vaux because it was hidden somewhere in the very wall of the room, something like the safe deposit box at a bank.

"I am not to be disturbed," announced Kroll. Then he shut the door.

Helmer, keeping Vaux at bay with his pistol, summoned two workmen from a sub-cellar. Peasants, thought Vaux; animals without minds, endowed with nothing but animal strength. In the grip of two such specimens, even his own steel muscles were helpless. Without a struggle he permitted himself to be bound to a chair. The peasants departed the way they had come. The American and the Hisalpinian faced each other, Vaux contemptuous, Helmer wary.

"Please don't try anything," begged the sculptor. "I don't like to do this in the first place, and I loathe putting a bullet hole in that fine body of yours. You will be my masterpiece, a perfect athletic type, every muscle rigid, every vein swelling—not a slobbering wretch like Manning."

"You little rat," said Vaux. "With one arm free I'd break you in half, and then shatter you into little pieces, and throw you down the sewer! Do you think for one moment you can get away with two murders?"

"It is not my function to think," said the sculptor. "That is admirably attended to by my tall colleague, whose mental powers have already been demonstrated to you."

"Your master, you mean," sneered Vaux.

"Imagine making a tool of an artist—for what? To gratify the whims of a madman."

"Say what you want," responded Helmer. "Nothing you can utter will change my purpose one iota. Kroll is not a madman. As soon as we have sent the formula to our own country, Kroll will vanish, flying to Maine and then across the ocean to safety. He will be a rich invalid going to Europe for his health, and he will have a couple of attendants in his amphibian whose stupidity will disarm every inspector. I myself —I shall remain here, carrying on the good work of extracting thousands from your society people. Adding insult to injury, eh?"

Vaux flung him a look of contempt and remained silent.

"I do believe I forgot to search you," said Helmer suddenly. He stepped close to Vaux, pressed the muzzle of his weapon against his temple, and ran his delicate fingers over his pockets. "Ah, I thought so," he murmured, drawing the pistol from the young man's shoulder holster.

He held it to the light. "Gold-inlaid," he observed. "Very remarkable chasing. And—oh, yes—initials, too."

"I'll cut my initials on your heart, you scum!" shouted Vaux, tugging frantically at the heavy ropes that held him to a chair fastened in the floor.

"Not with this," said Helmer. He drew the loaded cartridge clip from the butt of the pistol, threw it into a waste receptacle, and replaced the initialed plates. "This will remain as a souvenir of a delightful friendship," he said. "Excuse me a moment."

Last Minutes

HE deliberately turned his back on Vaux and placed the expensive weapon in a little wall cabinet. "So I won't forget it," he explained, with a smile. "I don't get a gift like this every day. F. V.—F. V.—I must invent a name to fit those initials. Ah—Franz Vollmer! My own first name, and my *real* last name!"

Vaux opened his eyes wide. "Vollmer!" he exclaimed. "Wasn't there a Vollmer in the last war—"

"Your memory is excellent," said the sculptor. "There *was* a Vollmer in the last war. My eldest brother. His plane was shot down by one of your countrymen. I was very young then, but I swore at his grave I would devote my life to intense and active hatred of American and Americans. Do you think I could get anywhere with my real name? But Franz Helmer, the famous sculptor—who could imagine anything so worldly of him as international hatred? So you see," he continued, with an unpleasant inflection in his voice, "so you see there is really no use in your trying to escape, and as for your talking me into anything—offer me your entire fortune, plus the millions of the rest of your family, and see what happens."

"No," said Vaux. "It would be a waste of money. You would keep your promise just as well as Kroll kept his promise to Manning. But why don't you kidnap me to Europe, or Africa or somewhere, and leave me penniless—but alive? I'd never be in a position to harm you."

"And I suppose you offer me a king's ransom for that?"

"No—but a clear conscience."

Helmer laughed aloud. "Enough!" he said impatiently. "We cannot afford to have you alive, even at the ends of the earth. A Vaux can get by anywhere. No, Kroll is right. As soon as he emerges from his sanctum—" He did not finish, but let his eyes wander to the tank of blue liquid.

"Anything but that!" exclaimed Vaux. "Why don't you shoot me like a man instead of torturing me like a fiend?"

"One thing I can promise you," said the sculptor. "You will not suffer as Manning did Before you are fastened in that tank you will be unconscious. You will be stretched out so that when we stand you on your feet—later—you will have no unconscious look about you. And if your countrymen recognize you, as I show them my greatest works, I will boast of the time when the great Freddie Vaux amused himself by posing for a lowly artist!"

* * *

Freddie Vaux sat in numb silence as minute after minute ticked by and vanished, as far as he was concerned, into the ocean of eternity. For once in his adventurous life he owned himself beaten, and without hope or resource. There was one possibility of escape—if the government operatives suspected he was a prisoner and raided the place. But how on earth could they know? He did not believe in mental telepathy, and even if he did he realized that no hard-boiled man-hunter ever acts on a whim. "I wish a lion had finished me instead," he thought over and over again. "This way I won't even rest in peace—not a decent grave—no place where army airplanes can drop flowers on me Decoration Day."

Helmer walked up and down before him, abstractedly smoking a cigarette, but keeping his sharp eyes on the man in the chair. Vaux felt his hands and arms grow numb from the tight cords. He knew from past experience it was useless to try to free himself. He had read once of a man who carried a little saw concealed in a hollowed-out coin, and cut his bonds that way; but under Helmer's eyes, he reflected, not Houdini himself could have escaped without a bullet between the eyes or in the heart.

More than once his fascinated gaze roved to that fatal tank of innocent blue solution. On one side he saw rows of heavy copper plates, ready to be placed in solution to send their atoms to the cathode. He imagined what had happened to Manning. An idea struck him. Perhaps, at the last minute, he could disconnect the current, spill something into the solution—anything—

"Tell me what really became of Manning," he suddenly asked Helmer.

"It is better for your peace of mind not to know," answered the sculptor. "I'll tell you nothing. Ask Kroll. I'm sure he will take the greatest delight in recounting the details of that clever sculpturing. Personally, I would have

killed him and cremated him, but Kroll knows best."

"Helmer," began Vaux in desperation, "I'll strike one last bargain with you."

"Since when does the mouse bargain with the cat?"

"LISTEN to me, Helmer, or I'll haunt you to hell! Take my check book from my breast pocket, draw a check for as large as amount as you please—you can see the balance runs to seven figures—and I'll sign it—IF you promise you'll try to persuade Kroll—no, you can't persuade a lunatic. If you give me your word, for whatever it's worth, that you'll shoot me through the heart, take my body out to some lonely road and leave it there. No one will ever suspect you; it will look the work of gangsters; and I'll have a decent burial, and my family—my family will know where I am. I'm not asking this for my sake, but simply for the old people who think so much of me."

"Yes," said Helmer with a smile. "For the first time your family will know just where you are at night. They won't have to look for you at the night clubs. But you must think I'm an awful fool. I'm afraid your fright has deranged you."

"What's the matter?" asked Vaux.

"Why, you must be mad! In the first place, I couldn't cash that check without being suspected of murder; in the second place I would have to reckon with Kroll, and I'd sooner face a tiger; and in the third place,—did you really think I would loosen one hand to allow you to sign that check? You're not so clever, Freddie Vaux. I wouldn't trust you with one arm free any more than I'd trust a bound lion with one paw free."

"A compliment," said Vaux. "But I meant it. You have a gun. As soon as I sign it, shoot, and be damned! Is it a bargain?"

"Not while I am in my senses," said Helmer. "Even with a gun I wouldn't be safe. I know your reputation. You're only an amateur boxer, but you once knocked out the middleweight champion—in a private affair. You know jiujitsu like a Japanese. I've heard that there are one-armed death holds. And in addition, you're desperate, while I'm calm. That will make you ten times as resourceful and ten times as fast as I am. No, sir! Once and for all, no. Not one finger!"

"Then shoot now," pleaded Vaux, "and do one decent act in your whole rotten life. Even *you* can't be so low—"

"I don't want to hear any more," said Helmer, impatiently. "Talk to Kroll."

Vaux relapsed into silence, and gave himself up for lost. He closed his eyes and tried to compose himself. He would face death bravely, as he had in the jungles of Africa, in the air, under the sea. But such a death!

Presently a door opened and Kroll appeared, his face flushed from intense mental concentration, his eyes red from strain. "At once, Helmer!" he commanded. "Prepare the tank."

Helmer slunk away, and Kroll advanced to the prisoner. "Well," he asked, "and have you resigned yourself to becoming immortalized in bronze?"

"Copper," answered Vaux." Even *you* couldn't make bronze flow in a solution."

"Trying to gain time, eh? Perhaps you think I'll experiment on it now? So did Manning."

"And that is really Manning I saw—I mean, is Manning inside that horrible statue?"

"He is. Didn't I tell you?"

"No," said Vaux, talking for time. "You left off with the formula. Perhaps you were only trying to tantalize me. Even Helmer won't tell me what has happened."

"He didn't like it," said Kroll, with a grimace. "But I—ah, well, you wouldn't understand."

"Just to gain time," said Vaux, with desperate humor, "I'm going to ask you to tell me about it. Perhaps if you allow me to see that figure again, I'll control myself so as not to appear so ridiculous."

Kroll considered a moment. Then he drew his pistol, pointed it at Vaux, and called to Helmer. "Untie him!"

Helmer started to protest. "Untie him," repeated Kroll. "*I'll* watch him. You go prepare the plates."

CHAPTER V

The Fiend's Torture

THE sculptor, against his will, did as he was told. He stepped back and Vaux rubbed his paralyzed forearms to restore circulation. Kroll motioned the young man to precede him, and they walked slowly in the direction of the tortured figure of Manning.

"As Helmer may have told you," rumbled Kroll, "you will suffer nothing. We will do you the supreme favor of allowing you to inhale a container of hydrocyanic gas. which smells pleasantly like almonds, and brings instant unconsciousness."

"And death soon after," amended Vaux. "You aren't fooling me, but I suppose I am to be grateful for that, also. You didn't allow Manning to experience that supreme mercy, did you?"

"No! After he delivered the formula, I verified it, locked it up, and then, as he stood shivering with fear, I struck him a terrific blow on the jaw. He fell like a log. Helmer and I rubbed him all over with graphite and clamped him in the tank again, where, to my supreme satisfaction, he again revived, and this time he realized there was no escape. Observe the fear on his face," said Kroll, waving his pistol toward the distorted features of the bronzed figure. "We switched on the current, the solution began to bubble, and he wailed. He knew what was taking place.

"Simple, isn't it," continued the scientist. "A mere matter of anodes and cathodes, and the perfect crime is committed. Two perfect crimes, I should say, Vaux," he repeated, with unpleasant emphasis on the last word.

"Imagine! Here was Manning, the cathode of a large copper voltmeter. At the anode were

plates of copper, such as you saw a few minutes ago. I started the current. It was so low-pressured that I am sure he couldn't feel it. It didn't electrocute him—it let him live.

"Of course, you know how it works. Take two copper plates of the same weight and connect them to the opposite poles of a current generator. Immerse them in copper sulphate solution, and the current flows through the solution from one plate to the other. The negative plate gains weight as the other loses it—the positive copper ions are attracted to the negative plate, and they coat it. For every copper atom taken away at the anode, one atom is deposited at the cathode. And so on."

Vaux shuddered at this coldly inhuman exposition.

"It was curious to watch how Manning's blackened body became metallic as it took on its copper coating. His struggles grew weaker and weaker as the weight of the metal increased, and he fought to the last—like any cornered rat. See how tense the muscles are. He was caught and held that way—it prolonged the agony, or rather it made the agony worse."

"Impossible. Impossible," repeated Vaux. "You can't be real. No one as fiendish as that could exist."

"We won't discuss that. You'll soon find out," said Kroll, malignantly. "As his body became coated he sank lower and lower, until only his head remained above the solution. Then I suddenly passed my hand before his eyes—to make him close them. Then I rubbed graphite on the eyelids. You know—sometimes a carbon rod is used instead of a copper cathode, and the carbon takes on the copper. Reverse the current, and the carbon reappears.

"As soon as his eyes were closed—and I hope the graphite gave him some pleasant sensations—I rubbed more graphite over his lips, to give him a little thirst. I really believe he gulped the solution, and this, of course, plated his mouth and lips. Look inside—perfect job, isn't it?"

Kroll had lashed himself into a manical fury with his talk. His eyes glowed, and he almost licked his lips as he continued.

"Suddenly I pushed his head under the surface of the solution.—Once—twice—three—four times, until every inch of him had taken on that perfect metal coating. He was, indeed, a masterpiece!"

VAUX continued to watch the excited giant. In the back of his brain a forlorn hope had suddenly assumed larger proportions.

"And when he was plated from head to foot, when every inch of his body had been cased and coated in metal, so that he could not move, I shut off the current. I am sure he still breathed,—or he lived. It was all I could have desired. Helmer had almost collapsed from nausea. I brushed him aside. I, myself, I, Kroll, avenging the honor of my family, I alone would affix that statute to its niche." He pointed with his gun at the figure on the pedestal. "Soon you will join him. You will stand in another niche, a place of honor, representing youth! Youth and age! The perfect combination!"

Vaux placed both hands carelessly against the wall, as if to steady himself. Then he laid one on the hip-high base of the statue and rested the other on a low moulding along the wall.

"And then," said Kroll, appearing to swell to twice his huge size, "then I lifted him—I, myself—all that mass of metal, weighing hundreds of pounds—in these arms—"

He stretched his powerful arms above his head, in a mighty gesture of strength, like a lion stretching himself. In his huge right hand the pistol looked like a toy.

And then the victim acted. Caught in the little recess, his hands in a position to support his body, Freddie Vaux called to his assistance those powers he had developed on the polo field, the track, the gridiron, in the ring, and in the racing shell. As the giant spread wide his arms in that magnificent gesture, Vaux moved toward him as though on steel springs. With lightning speed he heaved himself up on his sinewy brown hands. And then, as Kroll still flexed his biceps, he brought up his brogue-shod right foot in the wicked, stiff-kneed kick of the Foreign Legion. His heavy shoe, driven by his powerful leg muscles, caught Kroll squarely in the groin.

The scientist groaned and crumpled. Even in his intense, his indescribable, physical agony—agony which makes a strong man as weak as an infant, paralyzes his brain, renders helpless all his other muscles,—Kroll tried to aim his pistol at Vaux as he writhed on the ground. Vaux leaped and landed heavily with his right foot on Kroll's right wrist. The heavy fingers opened. Snatching up the weapon, the prospective victim leaped over his prostrate foe and into the larger room.

Kroll tried to shout. From across the work benches came a spurt of flame, and Vaux flinched. The lobe of his left ear, clipped by Helmer's bullet, spattered his neck and shoulder with dripping blood. Vaux's first shot took the sculptor in the forearm. As the Hisalpinian groaned and stooped for his weapon the American fired again, and his bullet smashed a bottle of sulphuric acid behind Helmer. The liquid poured to the floor in a little torrent, drenching the sculptor's marvellous hands. He screamed in agony as the corroding stream ate away his well-kept flesh and laid bare to the bone. Still fighting, he lifted his pistol in his unwounded hand, rested it on the edge of the table, and fired again. But his aim was poor, and Vaux's third shot tore through the fleshy part of his hand, just below the thumb. Helmer, with both hands disabled, staggered to his feet and attempted to run to the panel in the wall.

"Stay where you are!" shouted Vaux, "or my next shot lands in your head!"

Helmer knew better than to continue. He turned round and faced Vaux, his hands dangling helplessly at his sides.

"Helmer," said Vaux, advancing to the sculptor and standing directly before him, "I never realized before what murderers you two could

be. You would murder me as you killed those two Secret Service men—"

"I didn't—I swear I didn't!"

"Don't swear. Helmer—or Vollmer—you're a great sculptor. You deserve to be with the immortals. I'd put you with them right now, if I weren't saving you for something else. You're too smart to remain among us mortals. Now what I want to know is—where is that formula?"

Helmer remained silent.

"Come on!" ordered Vaux, prodding him in the stomach. "Speak up. I'll count three. One—"

He did not finish. A pair of great brown hands encircled his throat, like contracting iron rings. Helmer, seeing Kroll coming behind Vaux with his inaudible step, had played for time.

A Killer Amuck!

THE American, caught between two fires, put all his strength into one last effort. He swung his pistol over and behind his own head. He heard the heavy metal crash against Kroll's forehead. The giant grip relaxed, and Vaux reeled round in time to fire over the shoulder of the sinking scientist. His bullet caught one of the ox-like workmen, who had run out at the noise of the shooting, squarely between the eyes.

Behind him he heard Helmer running for the door. With one leap he was beside him. He slipped his right arm under Helmer's left, between the sculptor's elbow and shoulder, and suddenly caught the hand with his own left hand and drew it down like lightning. There was a sharp crack. Helmer screamed and collapsed, his arm broken above the elbow in one of the simplest of all the tricks in the deadly category of Japanese wrestling.

Vaux stood still a moment, marvelling at the tremendous powers of Kroll, which had enabled him to rise to his feet after a kick which would have killed a lesser man. He had one thought in mind; to get out, summon the police, and capture the spies alive.

He dashed for the panel. As he reached the top step it opened. A tall figure—the butler—stood framed in the rectangle of light; and before Vaux could discern who it was, friend or foe, the newcomer's fist caught him squarely on the jaw, sending him reeling backward down the stairs. Vaux pulled the trigger of his weapon. The fifth shot brought the latest enemy crashing to the concrete floor with a bullet through the thigh. As the butler reached for his pistol, Vaux fired again, and this time the man lay still and did not move.

Weakened by the loss of the blood which dripped in a steady stream from his wounded ear, Vaux felt his senses leaving him. He leaned against the wall for a moment, so dazed he did not see Kroll stir and roll over. His only thought was to gain the street, to leap into his car, and dash away from all this at a hundred miles an hour. The reaction was setting in. He began to imagine he was breasting the clean salt waves of his beloved Pacific. The pain in his head became greater. His blood dripped steadily.

Then he came to himself with a start. He had reckoned without the marvellous, the superhuman recuperative powers of Kroll. The huge figure was flying at him, a raging giant; and behind him rushed four more men of his own race, bull-necked brutes marshalled behind their leader, who was shouting to them in his own tongue. Some hidden sub-cellar had discharged its full complement of iron-muscled stupidity, subservient to the will of the man with the better brain.

His retreat cut off, Vaux dashed for the center of the room. His throbbing brain gave him the mad hope of picking off his attackers, one by one. He wondered why Kroll did not have a pistol. Then he crouched behind the immense helix which supplied the terrific voltage to the incredible vacuum tube he had witnessed in operation, took careful aim at the advancing Kroll, and fired.

It was his last shot. It went wild. Vaux pulled the trigger again and again. Then he hurled his weapon at the men before the lead wall. And then, as he reeled backwards, in a daze, almost exhausted, he fell with the weight of his body on his elbow; and the elbow rested on the switch controlling the current for the vacuum tube!

There was an ear-splitting crash as a blinding spark leaped across the spark gap. The huge bulb filled with a bluish radiance. At the same moment the sickening odor of burning flesh came to his nostrils, mixed with the pungent aroma of ozone. Before his astonished eyes a reeking black hole appeared in the scientist's imposing forehead. Without a sound, Kroll sank to the floor. Vaux swung the tube to right and left, steeling himself against the tortured cries of the giant's comrades, who writhed to the floor and lay still.

Vaux brushed his hair back from his eyes and looked around for another enemy. In his hands he held the most terrible weapon yet devised by man. But he saw only Helmer, who had come to himself in intense pain, and who was groaning feebly on the floor. Vaux shut off the current and rested a moment. If anyone else appeared, he would be prepared.

Helmer tried to rise, but sank back. Paying no attention to him, the elegant Freddie Vaux, now a bloody, raging, disheveled, madman, ran to Kroll's little room and attempted to open the door. With the cackling laugh of the lunatic he dashed back to the tube, trained it on the door, and pressed the switch. There was a blinding flash, the strong odor of burning wood, and the door vanished, first buckling and warping off its hinges. In the wall beyond the door appeared a black orifice.

ONCE more he shut off the current. Then he heard a noise in the studio above him. There was the sound of a crashing door, and the tramping of heavy feet. "Come on, curse you!" he shrieked, settling himself behind the tube.

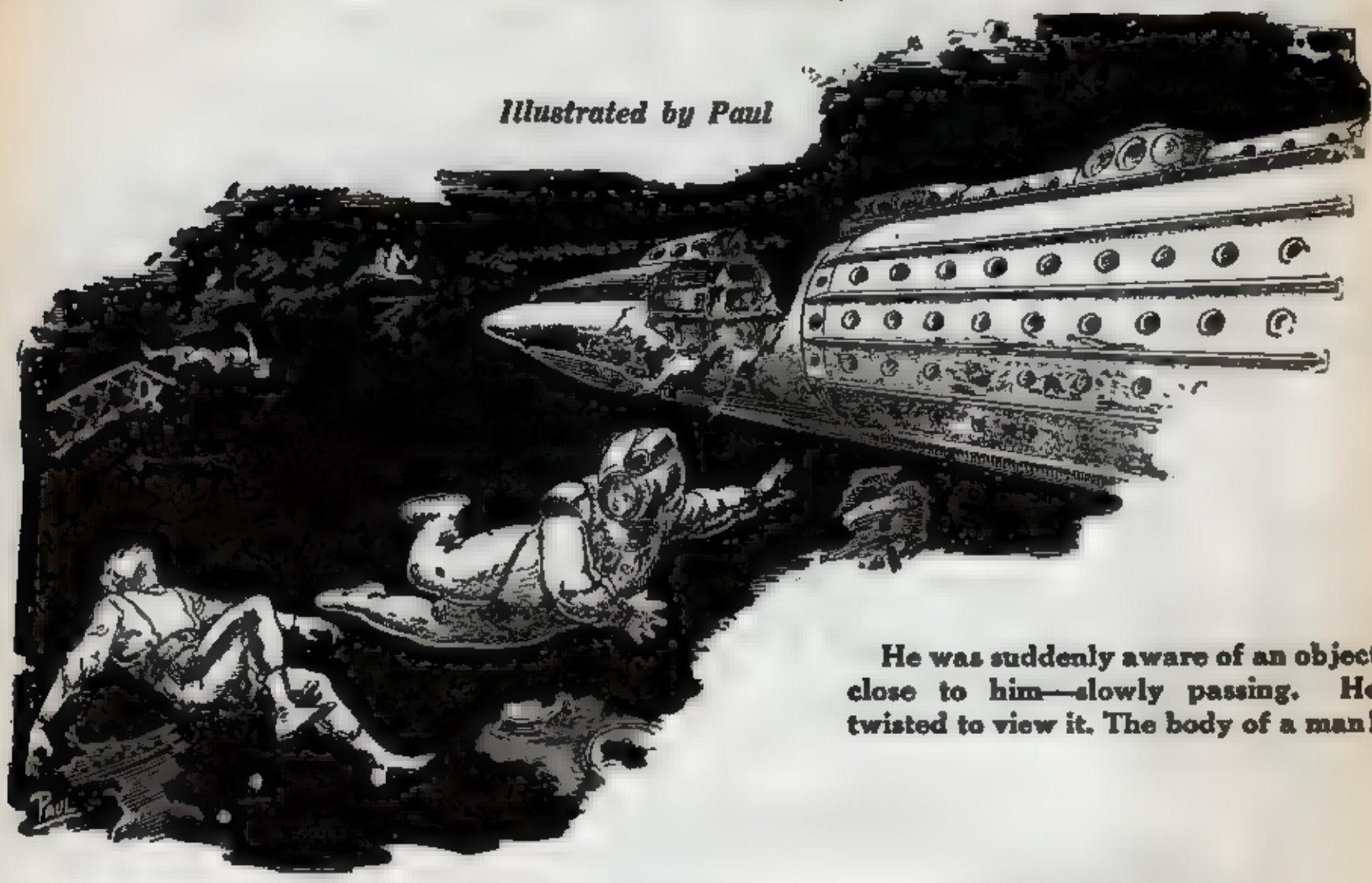
Then he thought better of it, and, feeling suddenly weak, he sank to the floor, shaking his

(Continued on Page 283)

The Mark of the Meteor

By Ray Cummings

Illustrated by Paul



He was suddenly aware of an object close to him—slowly passing. He twisted to view it. The body of a man!

Three human beings isolated in the immensities of space — death from starvation and suffocation nears. Who will weaken first!

THE central glassite dome of the *Comet* was rolled back. From where he stood, amidships in the peak of the vessel's superstructure, Graham could see down past the main cabin roof to the narrow side-deck where the passengers were coming up the incline from the landing stage. Beneath and beyond the stage lay the lights of the great Martian city, the oval roofs and spires and minarets of its buildings interspersed with the giant mushroom growth of its trees. And beyond the city the great canal-like gash, filled now with the evening water-tide which placidly mirrored the stars—a silver gash like a sword slash across the rolling countryside.

The moment of departure was at hand. Graham Trent was radio-helio operator of the *Comet*, and at the moment he had no duties to occupy him. The *Comet's* twenty or thirty passengers seemed all on board; the stage was lined with waving friends. The *Comet* resounded with bells, moving signal lights; the hum of the dynamos beginning their first low throb. They would be away presently, inward bound on the return voyage to the Earth.

Graham's attention was suddenly drawn to a last arriving passenger. A woman shrouded in the white street robe of a Shahn virgin. She came hastily up the incline, a steward preceding with her handbags. Though Graham leaned forward curiously, he did not realize that his destiny was at a cross-roads. It was too small a figure for a Martian girl. As she reached the deck a hooded tube-light fell by chance upon her face. An Earthgirl. A face framed by dark curls. Even at that distance it seemed to Graham that her face was one of rare and extraordinary beauty.

She had followed the steward toward her cabin and was lost to Graham's view when yet another belated passenger arrived. A Martian man. He was some six feet in height—rather undersized for a Martian. A man of perhaps forty. Sleek, grey-green skin—a native of the Ferrok province. He seemed an important personage. The stage-master deferentially ushered him and his luggage aboard.

Graham watched him idly. A Martian gentleman, perhaps a man of wealth. A sleek and

dapper fellow garbed now in Earthly evening clothes in the fashion one might see in any notable gathering of Great New York. Yet to Graham, the men of Mars were always strange—sinister figures.

This late arrival was bareheaded. From the peak of his forehead, his smooth black hair, shot with wide white strands, went sleekly back to suggest the mane of an animal. It fell long to the base of his neck at the back and at the sides it was brushed neatly above his round gray-green ears— He was lost in the group of passengers on the deck.

With the glassite dome closed the *Comet* was presently ascending the Martian atmosphere. The vessel was throbbing, humming, whining with the low mingled sounds of its many mechanisms. The pressure air sang as it oscillated in the double shell of the hull; the electric rocket-streams for this atmospheric passage hissed as they surged out like a tail beneath the uptilted ship; the pressure pumps throbbed rhythmically filling the tanks in preparation for the shifting of the gravity plates—it was all a steady blended hum of sound.

RAY CUMMINGS

IF we grant that interplanetary travel will one day come and people will travel as blithely to Mars or Venus as we do now across our oceans, we can realize that the adventures encountered in such journey will be one of the most extraordinary kind. A wreck on an ocean liner for example means merely the taking to life boats, or the awaiting of rescue but a few hours away. But in empty space tens of millions of miles from the nearest world and possibly millions from any other ship, an interplanetary wreck would be replete with occurrences of the most amazing nature.

But man is always man—no matter if he is in a large city or adrift in interplanetary space. He will carry with him his old fears and prejudices and lusts. And if as might easily happen, three people are obliged to fight out their existence adrift in the emptiness of the heavens, he may easily give way in a violent fashion to these lusts—and provide as he does in this case by the master hand of Ray Cummings, the material for the most dramatic of stories!

II.

Romance!

"BUT I think you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," Graham said earnestly. It was two days later, with Mars rapidly merging into the immeasureable skies.

She laughed softly. "That's nice of you."

It occurred to Graham that the compliment sounded very naieve. He had not meant it so; it had burst from him. Here on the narrow deck of the *Comet*, with the Sun on the other side of him, there was only the soft blended starlight on Alma's face as she sat in the deck chair beside him. An effulgence of Heavenly beauty.

"But I mean," he laughed. "Don't think me a silly fellow. I'm not—at least I hope I'm not. It's easy enough to pay extravagant compliments—"

"Oh," she said demurely, "I hadn't realized it was so extravagant."

He flushed. "I didn't mean that. You know I didn't. Look here, I'm trying to say just the opposite. You're beautiful. More beautiful than any girl of Earth, or Mars—and I'm telling you so, though I hardly know you."

It was the third or fourth time they had talked together. She had told him nothing of herself. Her name was Alma Rance, Graham had soon learned. The Martian man who had come aboard just after her was called Set Kol. Was there anything between them? So far though Graham had not seen Alma speak to Kol since the voyage began, he was convinced that they knew each other. He had remarked the Martian's tall sinister figure promenading the deck. It seemed that frequently the man flung covert, leering glances at this girl. He had seen a shade of fright cross her face at his approach. What mystery could there be between the two? Had she come aboard that night, trying to escape from him out of Ferrok-Shahn? Was he following her now back to Earth? Graham thought so.

"I hardly know you," Graham repeated. "I want to know you—really I do."

He felt suddenly swept by emotion. The dim deck around them seemed remote. There was only the starlight—the black vault of the Heavens, strewn with blazing gems, and red Mars a dwindling but still gigantic disc. It seemed to Graham that here in space, detached from all worlds, this girl and he were alone together; their spirits clinging; it seemed as though after ages of emptiness, they had found one another.

And to her must have come something similar. Her small white hand moved over and touched his. Her fingers held his fingers. And between them something flowed. A current. Imponderable. Intangible. Something which marked unmistakably to them both the chemistry of love.

"But I say—" Graham stammered.

He saw the starlight mirrored in her eyes. Wan, misty starlight.

He stammered, "But I say—"

A step sounded. A passenger wandered past and stood at one of the window-portes nearby, gazing at the glories of the firmament. His profile half seen in the star-light resembled the Martian's, and that sardonic smile, the smile of a man content to wait— Alma said awkwardly,

"I—really I must be going below. It's very late."

He stood beside her. "Good night—"

"Good night," she said, and left him.

III.

The Juggernaut!

"QUITE a sight, isn't it?" said Graham. "This way, Alma."

She followed him along the metal catwalk. The central domepeak spread over them. The black firmament was a glory of blazing worlds through the overhead windows. The *Comet* was five days out from Mars. The planet hung like a great reddish full-moon behind the ship's stern. The round disk of Sun was ahead—a fiery ball in the blackness blazing with prismatic colors, its gigantic streamers of flame mounting to make the brilliant corona.

The network of ladders and bridges up here in the ship's mid-dome section was illumined by mingled starlight and sunlight. The top of the cabin superstructure spread some twenty feet beneath Graham and Alma. It was like being in the rigging of an ancient surface ship.

"Only my room and the Captain's quarters up here," Graham was saying. They passed a transverse glassite bulkhead; Graham slid an airport door and they went through the opening.

"You're sure it is all right for me to come?" the girl asked.

"Of course," he laughed. "I have Captain Blake's permission. He's down on the forward bridge now. No one up here. I'll show you his chart room—then my helio-room."

By the ship time it was early evening * of the fifth night out from Mars. The strains of music wafted up from the forward lounge. The passengers were in a gay mood. And Graham too was very happy. The flush on Alma's cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes as she clung to him on the narrow walk and gazed so interestedly. . . .

"These are the Captain's rooms," he said. He showed her the two small connecting rooms—metal cubbies perched here like birds' nests. A chart room, and the Captain's bedroom. They glanced in.

On a table by the Captain's bed stood a glass of milk and a small plate of sandwiches—his accustomed meal before he retired—which a few moments before a steward had placed there. And a carafe of drinking water was in a rack over the bed.

"And my cubby is along the bridge—this way."

Twenty feet further, on the opposite side of the catwalk hung Graham's helio cubby. It was a metal box-like room some ten feet square by six feet high. Graham's bunk was in a bulge of one of its walls, with a portière draped before it.

"So this is where you work, Graham?"

"Yes," he said. "Sit down, Alma. I've a message to send. I'll show you."

The room was dim with starlight from its single square side window. The radio sending equipment and the rotary helio-mirrors, prisms and light portes were ranged on an instrument table. There was another small table, with messages on files; and two small chairs.

Alma sat down, gazing out of the window. Its glassite pane was merged here with the dome. There were two doors to the room, both of which had transparent glassite panes. One gave directly onto a pressure chamber and then to open space—an exit porte for use only to ventilate the room when the ship was in the atmosphere or an emergency exit into space. The other door, on the opposite side, was the one by which Graham and Alma had just entered from the catwalk. They left it open; the room was fairly hot.

"Like my quarters?" said Graham. "You do get a marvelous view. Don't you think so? And it seems different—you're more detached somehow. Don't you feel it?"

An awkwardness was upon him. Having Alma alone up here— He found himself trembling. He drew up his chair beside her.

"Alma, I didn't bring you to watch me send a message. I—there's something I want to say to you. I wanted to say it up here—really alone with you. Up here alone—with the stars around us."

His hand touched hers; he could feel her trembling, emotion-swept like himself.

"Graham—"

As though it were fate always snatching them apart, a vague moving shadow fell upon the starlit table before them.

"Graham, look!"

A shadow from the catwalk doorway. Graham leaped up. At the door he was just in time to see a man's figure disappearing past the Captain's cabin.

"What is it, Graham?"

"That damned Martian—that Kol—eavesdropping on us! Sit quiet, Alma! By Heaven—"

He got no further. Beyond the network of bridges the firmament was visible through the ship's bow dome-peak. Graham caught a glimpse of a huge black shape out there; a great whirling rock dashing through space. The sunlight and starlight edged it, as in the blackness it suddenly became visible—forbidding—menacing— It had been a thousand miles away a minute before; but now like a juggernaut it leaped toward them. A derelict asteroid! There would be a collision!

Graham turned. "Alma—" He was aware that he had clutched her. He heard the doomed *Comet's* interior resounding with bells; the danger siren starting its shriek. An instant of chaos. The ship lurched upward, its rocket exhausts working furiously! Too late! A blinding flash

*Early evening according to the ship's reckoning.

of light enveloping everything. A smashing tearing impact. The universe quivering, staggering.

Graham's senses slid into an abyss of soundless blackness—

IV.

A Dead World!

WITH returning consciousness Graham found himself not greatly hurt; he had been flung to the floor of his cubby. Alma was there. Dead? No, she moved; she opened her eyes.

"Graham—"

He knelt over her; raised her head. In a moment she was recovered.

"What happened, Graham? What was it?"

In the blur of those next minutes Graham moved about his room. Then he roved the spider bridges; went down one of the dangling ladders a distance. What had happened was all to obvious.

Beneath his cubby the *Comet* lay wrecked and broken. From the ladder he stared down at it. The forward dome-peak was bashed in. Everything movable on the ship had been hurled into a strewn litter. The side decks, as they showed from where Graham stood, were piled at the forward ends with hurled deck chairs. And bodies were there. Lying motionless—stiffened in death—

The emergency glassite bulkheads were closed. Graham drew a deep breath; he was shuddering. There was air here in this upper dome section. The automatic bulkhead slides had closed and were holding it. But, save for this upper network of ladders and bridges, Graham's cubby and the nearby Captain's rooms, the ship was devoid of air! A dead ship. It lay now, silent—gruesome—

Graham stood listening to it. None of the mechanisms were operating. A derelict in space, the doomed *Comet* hung poised. A little broken world, floating in the grip of all the myriad balanced forces of the universe.

The ship's interior air-pressure had been maintained at some fifteen or sixteen pounds to the square inch. The bow dome had cracked. In a moment from every corner of the vessel, the air had rushed out into the vacuum of space—the cold had rushed in to fill everything. The bodies down there on the deck not mangled; suffocated, lying there stricken when the air left them—frozen into horrible positions—

And Graham knew that all over the ship it was the same. In every public room, in the staterooms, the mechanism rooms—death everywhere. With life only up here in the center dome. Of all the ship's passengers and crew, only he and Alma remained alive.

He went back and told her. And she stared at him. The last thing which had been in both their thoughts was a great desire to be alone together. Now, by strange fate, they were alone. The only inhabitants of this broken little world, drifting in the immensity of space.

Graham made his calculations. The air renewers were not operating. But the air here would last them for a week or more. Though there was no food and no water here he was hopeful. One may live weeks without food, and days without water.

"I can summon help," he told the white-faced girl. "There will be a patrol-ship somewhere between here and Mars. Or I can raise Ferrok-Shahn—I had them a few hours ago with the radio. In two days at the most, help will come to us."

She watched him while in the starlit little cubby, with the silent dead ship beneath them, he sat at his call-key. But the radio would not operate!

They were marooned, alone—no, not quite alone. Outside the cubby doorway they heard a sound. A cry—or a groan. Then footsteps. From beyond the Captain's quarters, along the catwalk bridge, the figure of Kol the Martian came staggering. He too had escaped death. There were three of them up here to share this air, to struggle for their lives together.

He staggered into Graham's cubby. His face was green-grey with fear. He was uninjured. But he knew as well as Graham, their situation, and the terror of impending death was on him.

"Can you get help, Trent? The radio—"

"It isn't working."

"Then the helio-senders—"

"I was just getting ready to try them."

Kol was tremblingly eager to help. "It must work, Trent. It must! Marooned here! To die, slowly day by day suffocating here—Good God—"

Alma suddenly laughed. It was quavering, half hysterical. Graham touched her.

"Quiet, Alma. Don't let yourself start—like that. We're all right. I'll raise some patrol ship."

"I—I just thought—the Captain's midnight lunch! A glass of milk and those sandwiches. And a carafe of water. We have that much anyway."

The helio was working! For an hour Graham sat over the humming, whirling little mirrors, sending his amplified oscillating lightbeam into the darkness of space.

Kol was so humble. So pathetically eager for life.

"It must—it must bring help, Trent." He bent over the operator hardly aware of Alma's existence.

"Do your best, Trent. I am a rich man. Riches are yours if you save me."

The instinct for life comes first. But the man's cowardice after his former proud attitude was nauseating.

"Let go of me," Graham said irritably. "If you want to help, let me alone. Keep your mouth shut." He shook off the Martian's clutch. "Sit over there out of the way." This was no time for the regard of social positions. Danger strips us down to elementals.

Kol moved aside like a frightened child— The helio flashed the call of distress over and over again. Would someone answer it?

Then suddenly the magnifiers picked up a response.

"I've got it!" shouted Graham. "It's all right —they see me."

V.

Deadening Hours

THE signals had caught a patrol ship. Graham gave the *Comet's* position at the time of the accident. The patrol would come and find them. It was some million miles away— There was an interval of darkness, five minutes perhaps. Then Graham caught a final message. He flung off his switch; the helio current went dead. He turned his tense white face to his companions, but he was triumphant.

"It's all right now. They'll be here in ten hours or so. They've cut off—nothing more to say. We've ample air—and with the Captain's lunch we won't even be hungry."

Kol looked up. "You're sure?"

"Sure of what?"

"Sure that everything is all right?"

"Yes, they're positively coming. Don't look so frightened, Kol. You're safe enough now."

"You will need to send no more messages?"

"No. Nothing more to say. Besides, that damned helio uses too much of our air. Smell the chlorine?"

He disconnected the main helio-wires, and stood up. "Come on, you two, let's go in and see the Captain's lunch. We'll have to divide it up. Three parts—"

His arm went around Alma. He felt strangely happy—life had come to them again. A few hours more, and then rescue.

"Come on, Kol. Nothing to worry over now. We're safe enough."

Graham stood holding Alma. And suddenly Kol leaped upon them. His fist struck Graham full in the face. Graham staggered and fell. But he did not lose consciousness. He was aware that the Martian was trying to drag Alma away from the cubby. In the blurred starlight he could see their struggling forms. He felt himself floundering, lurching to regain his feet. He knocked over a chair. Kol and Alma were near the door, but she resisted as he dragged her.

And as Graham stood erect, with strength flooding back to him, Alma wrenched herself loose. She staggered and fell against Graham as he leaped forward.

"You all right, Alma?"

"Yes! Yes!"

Kol had disappeared through the doorway. A madness was on Graham. A lust to kill this ungrateful wretch who became an enemy instantly his safety was assured.

But Alma clung. "No! Graham, no! Not murder—"

She held him just a moment too long. It flashed to Graham that Kol had run toward the Captain's rooms. And in the chart-room was the Captain's arsenal of weapons hanging in a rack on the wall.

"Alma, let me go!"

He tore from her. But on the bridge outside the helio room he was halted. A bullet sang by him and flattened itself against the heavy metal wall plate of the cubby. Then another. The two reports reverberated through the dome-space; and in the doorway of the chart room he saw the crouching figure of Kol, with leveled rifle.

"Alma, get back!"

Graham turned. Another bullet thudded near him, as he jumped back into the cubby. From the chart room, rifle in hand, Kol was advancing along the catwalk.

Graham slid the heavy door closed, and barred it. Kol came up. They could see him through the glassite pane. He was wary at first, and then deciding that Graham was unarmed, he came boldly and tugged at the door. Found that it would not yield. Thumped upon it. And his voice floated dimly in on them.

"Open the door, you fool! You'll smother in there."

Graham did not answer. He stood with his arm around Alma, holding her close as she huddled tremblingly against him.

"Don't be frightened, Alma. He can't get in. Nor fire through the door, nor the walls. They're too thick."

It was true enough. But Graham was cold with realization nevertheless. The tiny cubby was bullet-proof. But it was air-proof also. Only a few cubic feet of air were in here, and with the door closed already it was air fouled by the helio's chlorine fumes. It could never last until the patrol ship came.

Hours had passed—long torturing hours, as the fouling air made each breath a gasp of pain. Their heads felt swelled—distended, and they had to reassure each other they were not floating through empty space.

How could they last until the patrol came.

"We can't stay here," Graham would say over and over. "This is death—"

Their ears were roaring with the diluted chlorine fumes and the poisonous carbon-dioxide; the precious oxygen every moment was lessening as their lungs took it in; used it.

VI.

A Desperate Move

OUTSIDE on the catwalk the Martian still lurked, rifle in hand. His only desire was to murder Graham before the rescue ship arrived. And Graham now knew why; Alma had swiftly told him hours ago with a rush of half-coherent words. The characteristic, murderous jealousy of a Martian thwarted. He had met Alma in Ferrok-Shahn. He was a professional collector of beauties, this rich Martian. His harem was famous in the city. He had wanted to add the beautiful Earthgirl to it. Repulsed, he had flown into an insane jealous rage and threatened her life. When she tried to escape, he had followed her to the *Comet* and embarked with her. So that

was it. Now the Martian was persistent—like a wolf.

A dozen times he had pounded on the door in the interplanetary code the message, "Hand over the girl and you can come out. Don't be a fool!"

At first Graham had flown into a rage and had all but opened the door to face the armed Martian. But he had laughed scornfully and had been content to reply, "When Hell freezes!"

But the Martian had persisted. Each half hour as the air in the helio-room became more and more poisoned, the Martian watching their paling faces had repeated with the diabolical unvarying signal, "Hand over the girl—don't be a fool!"

Graham's rage had given way to laughter then a growing despondency. The signals began to appear as sounds coming from another world—incredibly remote—

Then a desire for life would well up in him, and even as his arm tightened about Alma, something in him whispered, "Why die—why not hand her over—I'm young—" But a wave of revulsion for his weakness followed and he would get up to stamp about the room like a caged beast.

Knock—knock, knock—knock—That signal again—"Hand over the girl—" It was luck Alma couldn't understand it— But he must do something—he would go mad—

"I'm going out," said Graham crazily. "We can't stay here."

She clung to him. "Out! No, Graham dear! He'll kill you."

"Not out there, Alma. Out into space!"

"Space! But Graham—"

"I have a pressure suit. Wait, I'll show you. I should have tried it before. Alma, you won't be afraid to stay alone? I must—I must leave you." He told her swiftly.

"I think I can get around outside the ship. Into the pressure porte behind the Captain's cabin. If I can get in there—get another rifle—"

But Kol could see them now through the door-pane. He would be forewarned— Graham took a sheet from his bed. He and Alma draped it over the door; and Kol watched them with a sardonic grin.

"Good!" muttered Graham. "He misunderstands us. Alma, listen—after I've gone you pull aside a corner of this sheet. Cautiously! Make sure he is out there. If he starts away, shout at him. Talk to him. Keep him occupied. And talk to me, Alma! Talk loudly to me, as though I were here with you in this room. Will you—can you do that?"

"Yes! Yes, Graham."

"Your air here will be worse. I'll have to use some of it getting out." He held her for an instant. "Alma—I'll do my best. It's the only way—"

The pressure suit covered him from neck to the soles of his feet, like the suit of an ancient sea-diver. Its flexible material was double shelled, and between the shells, was an electrified vacuum. Graham flashed on the oscillatory current. The suit bloated, puffed into a monstrous semblance of human form.

"Now, my helmet, Alma. You're not too afraid to be left alone?"

She smiled bravely at him. "Do your best, Graham. Come back to me safely!"

Alone in Space! The thought of it set Graham trembling. He had never done it! No one had ever done it save in a case of desperate necessity— Alma helped him screw the goggling helmet to the metal collar of his suit. On his back and at his belt the air-renewal boxes and the batteries of the suit's pressure-resisting current stuck out as monstrous lumps.

Through his visor-pane he saw Alma smiling at him. Her lips framed, "Goodbye."

The door to the pressure porte slid open. The porte was a tiny metal room barely large enough for him to squeeze into. He wedged in, and the door slid closed after him. The air here was normal at one atmosphere of pressure. He had taken this much of Alma's precious air to fill it. With his gloved fingers he now felt for the porte's mechanisms— The pumps were working! A thrill of fear rushed at him that they would not operate, but they did.

A moment or two. By the room's dial-indicator, Graham saw the air-pressure lowering. He could feel the outward, explosive tugging of his suit until his own regulators met and resisted it.

A moment. Then, with the air in the tiny porte almost exhausted, Graham slid the outer panel. The great void of star-filled abyss yawned beside him. The last little air in the porte went out with a rush, dissipating into Space.

Graham crouched at the brink. A million million miles of emptiness was beneath him. Great blazing worlds down there in the black darkness. Graham poised, with an unconquerable thrill of fear surging—

And then he hitched himself forward; straightened at the threshold and with careful calculation dove head first into the void!

VII.

In Space!

AND he did not fall! Graham knew he would not, yet every instinct within him was shuddering. For a moment his senses reeled into chaos. Then they steadied. The firmament had swung. All the great shining star-points had shifted; oscillated; but in a moment they stopped; hung motionless.

Graham found himself floating. His forward dive, as he had calculated, flung him slowly out from the *Comet*. He had moved perhaps two hundred feet, sluggishly retarding—like a log shoved into a lake of placid water.

He had now come to rest. He lay in the void. Weightless. Helpless to move, save that he could futilely kick and twist. A world in himself! He was no longer the inhabitant of a planet; nor the inhabitant of a Space-ship. Himself a world, floating here with all the myriad forces of Celestial Mechanics acting upon him—

Graham twisted and saw, behind him two hundred feet away, the wrecked broken side of the

Comet. The ship lay as though cradled in water. A vague pang shot past him. He had loved this ship. It had throbbed beneath him for so many hours, so many voyages. It lay now wrecked; dying. Unbreathing, save up there in the one bulkhead area which encompassed his own tiny cubby where Alma was imprisoned; the catwalk where Kol the Martian lurked; and the Captain's quarters.

Graham's gaze went to the bow. It was mangled. The dome was bashed in where the asteroid had struck it a crushing blow. A great hole was there out of which had rushed all the precious air of the ship.

The side-deck porte-windows had held intact. The side and stern, as viewed from Graham's position now seemed almost as though the ship were unhurt and upon her course.

Relative to Graham, the *Comet* was not moving. It hung there with the great star-field behind and around it. Yet he knew that it was falling. The forces of every remote star of the Universe blended here now upon it had determined some movement. It was following some path; moving, somewhere—

Graham for that moment had been so absorbed he had forgotten himself. He was suddenly aware of an object passing close to him—slowly passing. He twisted to view it. Gruesome horror! The body of a man! One of the ship's crew, flung out here with the outrushing air through the break in the bow at the time of the collision. The body floated quietly past. It was twisted; huddled. He saw for an instant, its face. Gruesomely bloated; crimson-skinned where the blood had welled out through the pores—

The body went calmly by, down the length of the *Comet* in a circular path, and around the ship's end. It was a satellite now! Doomed forever to encircle the greater mass of the ship. And it had acquired a slow axial rotation of its own, turning end over end—

Graham was for a moment almost motionless. Soon, he knew, he would pick up some movement relative to the *Comet*. Himself a little world, acquiring now its orbit. He had calculated his dive. He could not see the captain's cabin nor the catwalk from here, nor could the Martian see him—He found presently that he was lagging behind the ship as it fell. He began floating toward the stern, and moving slightly inward upon what seemed a narrow ellipse—

It was what he wanted. If he had not chanced that, like the gruesome body, he too would have become a satellite. He was not quite helpless of movement. The pressure suit had a tiny rocket wavestream. It would endow him with motion, though when used, its slight charge would be soon exhausted.

Graham used it sparingly now. The natural orbit took him elliptically around the *Comet's* stern. He watched his opportunity, and shot from his shoulder-pouch the tiny blue-white vibratory beam. Its thrust was slight, but enough. He found himself moving inward; the *Comet* seemed coming toward him. And then, with its nearness, his newly acquired orbit was broken. The ship's side pulled him with a swift acceleration—

He was turning end over end; the ship now above him, now beneath— A moment or two. Dizzying; confused. He was aware that he glimpsed the catwalk in the dome-peak, with the figure of Kol standing there. Had the Martian seen him? Graham could only hope not. Or, if so, his floating body, briefly seen, could be mistaken for those other bloated figures—

VIII.

In Hiding!

GRAHAM was aware of the *Comet's* side beneath him, and he was falling upon it— He saw it rushing up at him. There was an impact, broken by his metal suit. He struck against one of the deck's glassite window portes, slowly bounded away a few feet and then dropped back. This time he clung. Almost weightless; but he found that by holding to the outer protuberances of the ship's sides he could maintain his position.

He gained his feet. He was standing now on the side windowpane, his body sticking straight from it like a fly. He was standing upright and the wrecked ship lay on its side beneath him—He stooped and gazed down through the window. The deck-passage was a litter of wreckage. He could see the torn and broken doors of the superstructure's public rooms; the shattered panes of the interior cabin-windows. A myriad separate explosions and implosions had occurred in every portion of the ship with that first sudden rush of unequal pressures. He saw the strewn human bodies, lying where they had been stricken when the air left them— A woman clinging to a little girl lay in the Salon doorway where they had staggered gasping for air and had been suddenly overcome.

Graham started carefully walking. He had to turn away frequently at the sight of the lifeless figures— He was now not more than twenty feet from the upper pressure porte, which gave access to the chart room adjoining the Captain's cabin He knew every foot of the ship, inside and out. The little superstructure containing the Captain's rooms was between him and the catwalk. Kol would not see him—unless he had seen him already . . . Graham reached the side of the chart room. The upper dome, still intact, bulged out under him. Alma was down in here . . .

Graham suddenly realized that all this had occupied at least a half hour. Or more? He prayer that it had been no more. The air in his cubby must be horribly fouled by now. He must hurry . . . Had Alma been able to hold out? Would he find her unconscious? Dead perhaps? Or, at the last, had her instinct for life been too great—had she opened the door for the Martian?

Graham's bloated gloved fingers trembled at the thought as he stooped for the outer control button of the chart room emergency porte. The panel slid aside. The half-exhausted air of the pressure-lock came up with a puff of wind. Graham saw, down in the darkness of the small room,

the automatic inner door to the chart-room slide closed. He stood a moment to get his balance and then dropped into the lock chamber and closed its outer door after him.

Normality returned at once. He landed up the side wall of the room; but the interior gravity of the *Comet*—maintained to simulate the gravity of Earth—immediately claimed him. He fell into a tumbled heap upon the floor. It seemed, instantly that the ship had righted herself and lay now upon an even keel . . .

There were a few moments while Graham lay in darkness, listening to the hiss of the air as it came in to fill the lock-chamber. Then the pressure was normal. Graham moved to the inner slide. In a moment he would be in the chart-room. He would seize a rifle; meet Kol on equal terms outside on the catwalk—

Some instinct of caution made Graham keep on his helmet, and maintain the air circulation within his pressure suit. He pulled the inner door lever; and as the panel slid aside, he drew suddenly back from the opening. Fortuitous caution! The figure of Kol with leveled rifle crouched in the chart-room. The rifle spat flame; the bullet missed Graham and thudded against the further metal wall of the lock.

Graham crouched motionless in the blackness. He was helpless here; but he believed that Kol had not seen him; had only fired assuming he would be in the opening when the panel slid aside. A moment passed. The Martian crept slowly forward. The chart-room was very dim, but Graham could see the blur of his figure. Kol presently thrust the rifle muzzle over the threshold, pointing it sidewise to command the lock's interior.

The muzzle, just for an instant, wavered past Graham's shoulder. He seized it; jerked at it. The spurt of its shot flashed past his visor . . . Impelled by the jerk, Kol came over the threshold and Graham seized him.

At once they were struggling. The rifle fell unheeded between them. They swayed, locked together, the Martian seemingly small in Graham's huge bloated grip. But the suit was hampering and Kol had the swift sure movements of a cat. In the narrow confines of the tiny pressure porte Graham staggered to the wall and rebounded. Kol was stooping for the rifle but again Graham was upon him.

Through the visor pane of his huge heavy helmet Graham could see almost nothing. He felt the Martian tearing at him, trying to rip his suit, shoving him away from where Graham realized that the rifle was lying . . .

They came, swaying upon their feet, locked together, with a thud against the wall. Kol's back was to it, with Graham pressing against him. A little shaft of light from the chart-room door struck upon the Martian's grey-green face. It was set with a leer.

And the shaft of light showed that for that instant, Kol's head was touching the metal wall of the lock . . . Graham stooped and with a desperate jerk of his neck struck his heavy helmet against the Martian's face. Through the audiphone contact Graham heard the man's queer split screem. For an instant he went limp.

Then he revived; was fighting again. But now Graham had him over by the outer pressure porte. It was closed; but with a free hand, Graham seized the lever. The panel slid open; the automatic chart-room door banged closed.

The air in the lock went out with a tumultuous rush. At the outer threshold Graham stood clinging, with Kol gripping him. But the Martian's hold in an instant broke away. His air was gone; he was choking. There was a faint gasp from his lips. Graham cast him loose, and the rush of pressure took him like a wind-blown feather. His body blew out into the void . . .

At the threshold Graham gazed into the starry abyss. Kol's body sailed slowly out, stiff as iron. And by chance that other man's body came floating calmly past. Kol collided with it and the two bodies, embraced in death, wavered, found their new orbit, and gruesomely locked together moved slowly on . . .

* * *

Graham renewed the lock-air; went through the chart-room; discarded his helmet and suit. White-faced and shuddering he pounded at the helio-room door.

"Alma! Alma, are you alive? It's Graham! Let me in!"

A horrible moment of silence.

Then the door slid. She lay on the floor gasping. But the rush of pure air revived her.

"Alma—"

"Graham—you—you came at last—"

They presently stood together at a window near the end of the catwalk gazing at the blazing stars . . . The locked bodies went slowly, inexorably, past . . .

"Don't look, Alma! Don't— But here, look off this way! Alma—the patrol ship! It's coming! See the lights?"

Against the blackness of Space and the great blazing stars, a tiny line of colored lights was swiftly advancing . . .

THE END

Another thrilling story by

Ray Cummings

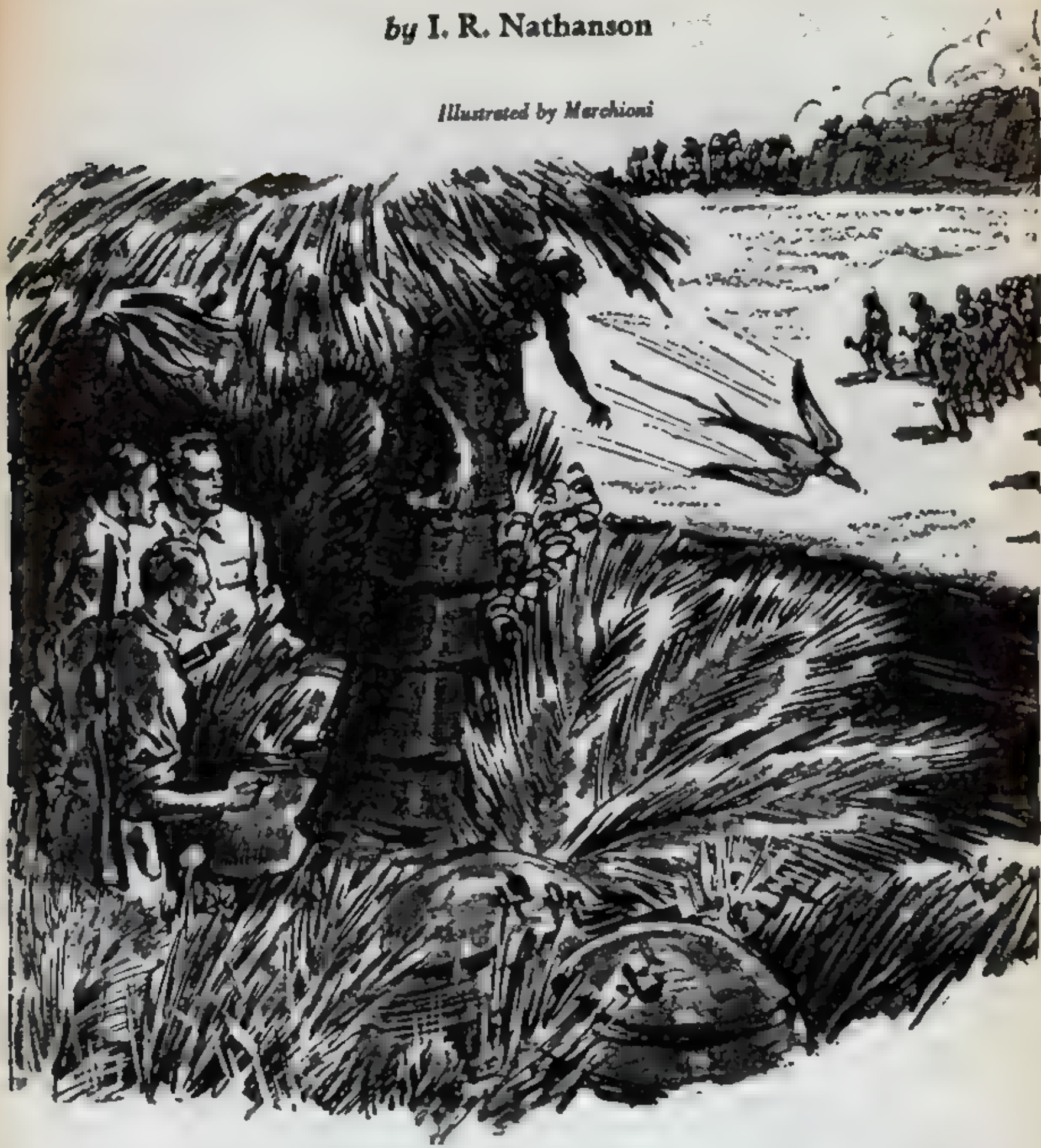
"THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION"

appears in the February, 1931 Issue of Wonder Stories—on sale Jan. 1, 1931.

Pithecanthropus Island

by **I. R. Nathanson**

Illustrated by Merchioni



ALL day long, since early morn, with but a brief stop the night before, the three aviators had been winging their way over the turquoise blue waters of the Pacific, weary yet happy over their success so far; the steady symphony of the mighty engines sweet music to their almost deafened ears.

And now the inky blackness of night embraced them in its blind bosom. Still they drove on and on, their metal bird roaring along at nearly a hundred miles an hour toward their goal in distant Australia.

The first faint streaks of the dawn cheered them on their great transoceanic adventure—the spanning of the mighty Pacific from the Golden Gate to Sydney. Then in the distance threaten-

Presently through the jungle came the clear sound of the bell. The apes, every one, stopped in their tracks to listen intently.

ing storm clouds appeared and rapidly drew near. They could see the rain curtains of the storm swiftly approaching over the billowing waters, and soon they were enveloped in a blind world of fiercely lashing rain and buffeting wind.

"We are in for a bad one," penciled Captain Howard Franklin, pilot and commander of the giant plane, *The Golden Gate*, to the other two fliers, his bosom friends and co-venturers. "We must try and skirt the storm area if we can, or rise above it."

Ten thousand feet up, and still they were in the clutches of the fiercest storm in their experience. In vain they battled to this side and that, up and down, ever seeking an escape from the battering wind and the swirling rain which now smote them with all the seeming force of a solid waterfall. In vain they sought to escape by descending almost within striking distance of the tempestuous waves of the angry ocean below, only to rise and struggle desperately up and away from the deadly danger. The storm area must have been of immense extent and height. Finally they gave themselves up to the merciless elements in a fierce endeavor to struggle ahead, trusting to the power of their great mechanical bird to pull them through. They were still more than a thousand miles from Australia.

For long anxious hours they battled on, soaked

to the skin and miserable from the piercing cold. *The Golden Gate* was pounded and twisted and often turned away from its course. They were flying totally blind through a swirling darkness, split by frightful flashes of lightning. At times the combined strength of Captain Franklin and his co-pilot and navigator, Ray Dunlap, was hardly equal to holding the wheel, the great plane all but slipping from their control. And then the earth-inductor compass went out of action, with only the steering compasses to guide them, adding greatly to their difficulties.

"Will the storm never cease!" spoke Captain Franklin aloud, the fierce wind tearing the words from his teeth without a sound.

Suddenly to their frightened senses came an ominous sound. One of the motors coughed and spluttered, picked up again reassuringly, and then went dead altogether.

"Sound the 'S.O.S' Dick," signalled the commander grimly to Williams the radio operator.

"Generator out of commission," he replied. "Cannot raise a sound."

With blanched faces they tore on at a greatly reduced speed, their two remaining motors still going, although it became increasingly difficult to maintain altitude, what with the vast downpour and raking wind. The drift indicator showed that they were being blown far out of their course.

Anxiously they peered through the swirling gloom for a possible sign of land, hoping against hope. They were now completely lost and far, far from any of the known island of the South Pacific.

And then another dread sound occurred—the starboard motor, too, began to miss.

"Looks like taps for us," communicated Dunlap, "unless we can land somewhere real soon."

A number of times the dark promontories and cliffs of the storm fooled them; they imagined they saw real land. The storm was gradually diminishing, and to their great joy there appeared the dark shape of land not far away—or was it land? The stuttering motor was threatening to die out at any moment.

The fury of the storm had by now abated, and they could make out the ghostly outlines of some large island, whose wooded shores stretched away to a great distance. They had lost their direction entirely and were at a loss to make out their whereabouts; but land they must regardless, for at any moment they were in danger of a watery grave in the storm-tossed waters beneath them.

Reaching the island they flew over an unbroken forest for many miles, looking for a safe place to land. Spying a break in the green forest top, Captain Franklin headed for it and effected a landing on a level sandy beach alongside a narrow river.

I. R. NATHANSON

MAN, to some people, is a fallen angel; and to others he is merely a superior type of ape—able to read, write, think and have sentiments. Perhaps he is a bit of both; but certainly we have never escaped completely from our ape ancestry.

Our instincts of idle curiosity; our superstitions, our terrible fear of the elements; many of our customs are all remnants of our past that we have carried with us up the ladder of civilization. In the present story our author shows us vividly how our understanding of the nature of our ancestors may well prove invaluable to us in a tight place.

But what our author brings out principally in this exciting story is the great gap of suspicion and prejudice that separates the various forms of life. Since we humans have acquired something of a control over nature we are not always concerned with the struggle for existence and we do not immediately view other beings instinctively as foes. But there is no doubt that to our ape ancestors a strange form of life became immediately an enemy—and a meeting of the two meant the extinction of one or the other; and it meant also a corking story.

Half-Seen Danger!

"WHEW, that was a narrow escape!" he exclaimed.

"Praise God," agreed Dick Williams, although he could scarcely hear what the other said. "That was as near to 'Davey Jones' Locker' as ever I care to be."

Shortly after, the hurricane, which had been rapidly diminishing, came to an end, and they were able to make out their immediate surroundings. They found themselves on a rock-strewn level of a river valley. On one side, to their right, the narrow river, clear and deep, moved swiftly north, a thick, and impenetrable jungle on its far side reaching clear down to the low banks. On the other side, to their left, about a hundred feet or more from the river's edge, high bluffs rose precipitously, hiding the landscape beyond behind their frowning crests, although the edge of a thick forest growth was visible on top.

The narrow, sandy valley formed between the

bluffs and river was visible for some few hundred yards north and south, following the river bends out of sight a short distance beyond. There was just about room enough for a take-off straight on ahead, where there was a break in the cliffs around the bend.

All that day they toiled in the steaming hot atmosphere, plagued by hosts of crawling and flying insects, the sun a glaring furnace. Occasionally they were startled by the strange noises of wild beasts moving through the jungle on the opposite side of the river. A number of times they were interrupted in their work by the sudden appearance of some huge ungainly creatures strangely elephantine in shape, who crashed through to the river's edge to drink; these stopped and hesitated a moment upon seeing the men, then evidently deciding they were of no account proceeded to drink, the while their wicked little eyes took them in.

And once a troup of about a dozen of these odd-looking elephants appeared around the bend coming toward them on their side of the river; and after stopping to drink and flounder about in the water at some distance from them, returned whence they came, to the aviators' relief.

"These are not elephants," Ray Dunlap, greatly excited, exclaimed in a low tone to the other two. He was formerly a professional paleontologist and assistant professor of comparative anatomy, who had forsaken his original calling a few years before in exchange for the lure of adventure in the air. His old-time professional interest went suddenly on fire at this apparition in the living bone and flesh of a supposedly extinct form of life. "If they are not mammoths, then I know nothing of comparative anatomy."

"Mammoths!" the others exclaimed in unison. "Mammoths? . . . "

"Unquestionably," he replied. "You have looked upon a survival of the southern mammoth, *Archidiskodon Imperator.*"

All three wondered in amazement.

They experienced several other unpleasant intrusions when the clumsy hulk of some gigantic rhinoceros drew close to them, eyed them suspiciously and after taking a drink moved off. At such times their hearts were in their mouths, for they knew of the ugly temper of these beasts; and feared a sudden, unexpected charge, in spite of the rifles they had with them, might well wreck their precious airplane and leave them marooned on this wild and unknown island.

Not until the end of the day was deepening into the mysterious gloom of the forbidding jungle was their work completed. By that time the dusk was made hideous by the fearful sounds of unknown beasts of prey. The daring aviators, although inured to the greatest dangers in the air, were somewhat unnerved by being thus suddenly thrown into the midst of such primeval surroundings.

As the gloom thickened, furtive shapes appeared and vanished in the jungle opposite, around the river bends, and even peered down at them from the bluffs above; huge shapes, small shapes, all indistinct in the greying twilight—twin coals of fire stabbing at them through the darkness.

Twenty some feet up on the high rocky bluff nearest them, was visible a wide ledge overhung by a huge jutting cliff. Ray Dunlap suggested spending the night up on that ledge; but Captain Franklin was in favor of remaining for the night in the cabin of the plane.

"I don't intend to leave my machine to the tender mercies of some of these beasts," he said.

"But this would be taking an unnecessary risk," Ray Dunlap objected. "I believe we can protect the plane as well as ourselves better from the bluff. Why not spend the night in the safety of the ledge up yonder, where we can keep an eye on the plane; and if any prowling beasts come too near for good, scare them off with a shot or two. And in the morning we can be on our way."

Acting upon his suggestion, a survey revealed —after considerable difficulty, as the sides of the bluff was almost vertical—that the ledge under the overhanging cliff formed a sort of open cave, safe from dangerous beasts above and easy to protect from those below, the while a close guard could be kept on the plane.

So taking their arms and some other equipment with them, the three aviators clambered to the ledge. They were very tired; and making themselves as comfortable as they could, with one eye and ear cocked for any untoward sight or sound from man or beast, they fell asleep.

With the first break of morning, the sky a deep clear blue free of any signs of storm, the three friends jumped up from their rocky beds, eager to be on their way. As they looked over the ledge, imagine their astonishment to discover that *the Golden Gate was nowhere to be seen!*

"GOOD God!" Captain Franklin ejaculated. "What could have became of our airplane! Somebody must have taken it while we slept!"

Stunned and puzzled they looked anxiously up and down the narrow valley, half expecting to see it, half expecting and fearful of an attack by some savage tribe of wild men. Their fingers tightened on their rifles.

"But who in the heck could have carted it away?" Dunlap spoke excitedly. "Surely nobody could have flown it away, or we should have heard the motors. And anyhow I never heard a sound; it does not seem possible we three slept so soundly."

And beyond the hideous noises of the jungle beasts which had kept all three from sound sleep most of the night until well toward morning, neither one had heard a sound to indicate that anything was wrong below their perch—or had they fallen soundly asleep asleep for a while just before they woke? . . .

"It was sure lucky for us we stayed up here during the night," remarked Dick Williams.

Captain Franklin set his jaw determinedly. "We simply must recover our plane," he spoke emphatically. "I don't care who did it—they're not going to get away with it without a fight from me. Let's get down and investigate; they cannot have toted it far."

With that the three men carefully clambered down. Plain as a sign post the wheel and tail marks of the plane led north up the valley. With the greatest caution, yet determined to recover their stolen machine at any cost, they followed the tell-tale marks, eyes and ears alert, weapons in hand; stopping now and then to peer carefully about them. Each was armed with a repeating rifle, two of which were of heavy bore; also each carried an automatic revolver.

"Who could have taken that plane?" they kept repeating over and over to themselves and to each other. No civilized men would have done that. There could be no reasonable doubt that a race of savages lurked near—perhaps of cannibalistic tendencies.

As they neared the upper river bend, the marks of the dragged plane swept around with the bend to the right. Straightening out, the tracks led up the narrow valley, the river on their right becoming choppy and foamy from many jutting rocks; while on their left the cliffs were getting lower and lower.

A quarter of a mile further on, the river bent to the right again, almost looping back on itself. As they reached the middle of the bend the bluffs on their left flattened out and gave way to the angled forest edge. A little farther on they came to a wide break in the forest, forming a sort of twisting jungle avenue; and straight into this the tracks of their plane turned in.

Here they paused. To enter boldly into the mouth of the forbidding opening, with the gloomy jungle on either side hemming it in, the broad avenue-like way swallowed up a short distance within the fastnesses of the jungle, was enough to make the stoutest hearts pause and take heed. An ambush perhaps? . . .

"What a sweet place for innocents to poke into," Dick whispered, his perennial good humor showing itself even in the face of this great danger. "Those pesky savages can sure think up a lovely slaughtering place."

After some hesitation they decided to follow the trail wherever it led. Wearily they entered the forbidding opening into the jungle and progressed along. The way was padded down by innumerable passing feet.

"Our fight through the storm was a featherbed compared to this," further remarked the voluble Dick.

"Not so loud," cautioned Captain Franklin somewhat irritably, "or you may find a permanent featherbed on the mossy jungle ground."

"Gives one the creeps just the same. Fine mess." A minute or two of silence, and his urge to speak reasserted itself. "Holy jimminy—if mother knew I was here!"

"Oh, shut up, will you," this time from Dunlap. "Cheer up; maybe tomorrow by this time you'll be stewing in some nice big pot—or sooner."

"Think they'll have a pot big enough for the two of us?" the irrepressible young fellow answered, the present great danger seeming not to effect him in the least bit.

"No!" came the sharp retort; "only big enough for one—you're too fat; I am too skinny."

"Then I hope you give them the indigestion," and Dick grinned. The others could hardly repress a smile.

CHAPTER II

Pithecanthropus Attacks!

A SLIGHT noise in the nearby bush made them silent and alert. What was that? Cautiously they crept along. They had by now pierced inside the jungle avenue for a distance of about three hundred yards. The trail here curved to the left.

"Look what's here," exclaimed Dunlap. Simultaneously all three noticed a number of articles belonging to them scattered along the trail; a helmet, a glove, a few tools; and farther on the scattered contents of Captain Franklin's suit case; a pair of trousers, his traveling alarm clock, a tooth brush and other articles. The suit case was torn to pieces.

As they came around the twisting curve, they were startled into immobility by a strange, heart-stopping creature which had suddenly stepped out of the bush and stood staring at them with fascinated wonder in its eyes.

The three men and the strange creature stood facing each other for a few moments, one a surprised as the other; astonishment and suspicious hostility written all over its bestial features.

And well might the three venturers have been surprised and shocked at the sight. For the thing standing there a short distance in front of them, one foot poised in the very act of movement, was unlike anything they had ever seen. It was grotesquely manlike in appearance, yet not man; ape-like in features, yet not quite ape. It stood quite straight and erect on muscular legs, the full height of an average man; but its face was hardly that of a man, its heavy jowl and great protruding jaw covered with a stubby beard.

Tremendously prominent bony eyebrow ridges arched over deep-sunken eyes that glared fiercely at the intruders. Down his almost flattened forehead, a mane of brownish hair reached to the very brow-ridges, giving the creature a most ferocious aspect. The large head, thrown somewhat forward from a thick neck, set on an enormously powerful body; bulging knotted muscles on the back and shoulders and long arms revealing tremendous strength. The creature was very hairy, although parts of his face and body showed a smooth brownish skin beneath a sparser covering of hair.

In one hand, huge and talon-like, the man-ape, or ape-man, or whatever it was, carried a massive club with a large stone tied to the end. In his other hand he gripped a large sharp-edged rock. Around his waist a strip of skin, belt-like, held in place another sharp stony instrument of some kind.

For a long time the three men stood silently facing the strange being who was so shockingly like a man, yet not quite a man. Then quickly, with a low guttural sound that seemed to rumble from its throat, bringing answering sounds from

nearby, it stepped back and slipped out of sight in the thick jungle.

"*Pithecanthropus erectus*,* or I miss my guess," Ray Dunlap exclaimed in stupefied amazement. "Good heavens, it seems impossible!"

The trio stood still for a few seconds, looking at each other, somewhat unnerved, undecided whether to advance or retreat. Suddenly without any warning whatsoever, a huge rock hurtled through the air with amazing force, barely missing Dick's head and bringing up against a nearby tree trunk with a resounding thud. Dick ducked his head, and the other two involuntarily did likewise, oddly enough after the stone had passed.

Had it connected, the missile would have crushed his skull like an egg-shell. The next instant another rock came through the air, followed by several more, the throwers, whoever they were, keeping out of sight.

Hastily the three men withdrew to the more open river bank. As they neared the opening, another stone zipping by caught Dick's shoulder a glancing blow. He let out a yell of pain, and with an angry oath turned about, rifle ready to fire, but not a sign of any assailant.

Out in the open, with the sheltering river at their back, they halted to decide on their next course of action.

"This is no place for little boys, with such things lurking about," Dick Williams exclaimed after a pause. "I'd hate to meet that bozo alone here unarmed. What is it, Professor Dunlap," he said, turning to the other; "you used to know quite a bit about those things. Shall we call that a man or not?"

"It is neither man nor ape," Dunlap answered. "It is most likely Mr. *Pithecanthropus* in person."

But I thought his last grandfather died a million years ago," Captain Franklin joined in. "'Dead men rise up never'; nor dead ape-men."

"That is true. But it oftens happens in the biological scale of life that a remnant of an ancient life-form survives in secluded parts of the globe. In Australia and the Pacific islands we find a good many examples of this. We cannot be far from the island of Java, where the fossil remains of such a creature was found near Trinil by Dr. Eugene Dubois in 1891. The name *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, signifies, the ape-man who walked erect.

"Java was at one time connected with the Asiatic mainland, as no doubt was this island. It appears to me as if some of these otherwise extinct creatures survived here on this forsaken island to the present day, unknown to the rest of the world. This should settle the great controversy which has raged over *Pithecanthropus* these many years." The enthusiastic light of the scientist gleamed in Dunlap's eyes. "What a find, what a find! *Pithecanthropus Erectus* in the living flesh and blood!"

THE three friends were in a quandary. Without the recovery of their plane, if it were indeed in sound condition, they were reduced to the status of modern Robinson Crusoes, only in a much more dangerous environment. To make matters worse, their ammunition was limited, as they had never counted on such a contingency; and after that should be exhausted, they would be in a sorry plight indeed. They were quite a number of miles from the open sea. And to reach it, in the hope of signalling a passing vessel, would necessitate a long march through these hostile surroundings.

"We simply must retrieve our plane, come what will," spoke Captain Franklin determinedly—"if those pesky ape-men have left it in a condition to be flown."

The other two agreed.

But here was the dilemma: To follow the trail of *The Golden Gate* through the jungle meant the facing of the unknown dangers which lurked there. And yet there was no other way out.

So after repairing to the safety of the ledge on which they had spent the night before, to refresh themselves with food, as well as to allow time for those ape-men to leave the vicinity, the three once more set out bravely yet cautiously on their dangerous mission. It was then early in the afternoon, the sun blazing fiercely overhead, the heat stifling and oppressive.

Sometime later they had penetrated a considerable distance northeast into the jungle along the broad well-trodden trail, the marks of the plane on the ground still plainly visible. They moved in single file, stopping often to peer ahead and listen.

The thick walls of the jungle hemmed them in. All around were dense thickets of thorn bushes, tree ferns, long hanging mosses and underwood lianas; nipa dwarf-palms, rattans and lofty trees were intermingled and interlaced with hosts of parasitic plants in bewildering confusion.

They passed enormous fungi which grew in great numbers; and the heavy fragrance of wild orchids and other jungle flowers hung in the air. Occasionally gorgeously colored parrots screeched by; or the stillness was broken by some chattering monkeys; or the sounds of small animals as they darted past. And once a troop of the mountainous mammoths crossed their path, the while the men threw themselves down in the grass till in their crashing progress through the jungle, the huge beasts were out of sight.

Captain Franklin, who was in the lead, stopped abruptly as he suddenly became aware of a large animal crouched a short distance in front of him. It rose slowly and with a cat-like tread began to advance towards them on short, powerful thick-set legs armed with enormous claws. The animal was larger than any tiger or lion either had ever seen; its huge head thrust forward between massive shoulders, its cruel gleaming eyes fastened on the aviators. From its slithering upper jaw two huge saber-like tusks—horribly long—extended almost the full width of its dreadfully wide, open mouth. Fearful snarling sounds came from its throat—it meant business, of that there could be no doubt.

For a few brief seconds the three men, unaccustomed to such things, were frozen with hor-

*The Java ape-man. The original was discovered in the remains of bones in Java in 1890. From these remains a hypothetical man was reconstructed who constituted a sort of missing link between man and ape.

ror. The next instant the beast charged with a most terrifying roar. Repeating rifles spat fire in quick succession, and the last spring of the ferocious animal landed it exactly on the spot from which Franklin had leaped in the nick of time. The great beast was mortally wounded It struggled desperately to its feet, giving vent to the most blood-curdling sounds, the while more lead was pumped into its body. Shortly after it expired.

Cautiously they drew near for a closer view.

"A surviving *Machairodus*," Dunlap exclaimed, once more greatly astonished. "Old saber-tooth himself! I declare, this island is full of living fossils!" He stooped over the dead saber-toothed tiger and examined the enormously long canine teeth; they must have been all of seven inches long. The three men shuddered and moved on.

A short ways further on they came to an open break in the matted jungle. After some difficulty they picked up the trail again and determinedly plunged into another broad, avenue-like opening into the jungle beyond, whither the trail distinctly led. The opening entered the forest and swung to the right in a great curve. Where it led they could but guess, but the determination born of desperation spurred them on.

Rounding a turn they came directly face to face with five or six of the ape-men marching toward them.

Besieged!

ASTONISHMENT and hostility was plainly depicted on their forbidding faces; their huge gnarled hands distinctly tightening on the heavy clubs and the sharp rocks which they held in their grasp. Clearly they resented this intrusion of their kingdom.

At the sound of a deep guttural sound from the foremost ape-man, the creatures dropped out of sight. The three men, fearful of a sudden attack or another volley of hurtling rocks, stepped back around the shelter of the bend and began a hasty retreat.

They had scarcely taken a dozen steps when the ape-men appeared and with fierce menacing sounds that were half shouts and half growls made toward them, brandishing their clubs, and the leader hurled a large stone with great force and cunning accuracy which missed by a hair.

At the command of Captain Franklin the three dropped to their knees and fired point blank at the on-rushing ape-men. The sound of the fire reverberated loudly, two of the charging creatures falling in their tracks. The rest taking fright moved quickly out of sight, howling and yelling with terrifically loud voices. From the distance came many answering calls.

In the meantime the three friends turned and fled precipitously toward the river, looking back as they ran to see if they were being pursued. Loud savage cries came to their ears in increasing numbers, and soon many dusky shapes moving swiftly in their direction made them aware they were the object of a savage hunt through the jungle. They redoubled their efforts to reach open ground before they should be overtaken.

The men were good runners and in the pink of condition; but in spite of their best efforts and although they had a good start, the ape-men were gaining on them, their eager cries sounding ever nearer, the foremost drawing ever closer in hot pursuit. Silently the fugitives sped on, their breath coming in short gasps. What if some other ape-men should cut off their retreat with these savage foes behind them!

It was a dreadfully cruel chase, the chances greatly against the unfortunate men. So far they managed to keep ahead, but one stumble—a twisted foot— At intervals they turned and fired at their pursuers in the hope of scaring hem off; but the ape-men were not to be turned from the pursuit of their quarry.

Reaching the open river level at last, the men sprinted more easily toward the sheltering lodge. Almost spent and exhausted they reached the foot of the friendly cliff, the savage horde not far behind them. With their last strength they clambered up the steep face of the bluff, the last few feet amidst a shower of pelting stones, any one of which spelled disaster, and none too soon threw themselves face down on the ledge.

Fully a hundred of the ape-men swarmed beneath, their cries bloodcurdling in their ferocity. Rocks and stones came up in a perfect shower, rebounding from the face of the cliff; their peculiar position as they lay prone, however, shielding them from immediate harm.

Acting under a concerted shout a number of the savage creatures began climbing up the cliff toward the unfortunate men.

"Let 'em have it," commanded Captain Franklin. The fire of their weapons reverberated loudly above the din, echoing and re-echoing up and down the valley and from the high bluffs and jungle front opposite. Amidst shrieks of pain and hair-raising death-cries, the foremost of the clambering ape-men fell headlong to the rocky ground below; the rest hastily scrambled down, and the great horde stood away at some distance brandishing their clubs and throwing stones. The nearer approach of some of the more venturesome brought a volley of death-dealing bullets.

That the ape-men were possessed of real intelligence there could be no question. There followed no more blind rushes. Instead they withdrew to a safe distance, lurking behind boulders and bushes, calling to each other and rendering the air hideous with their fierce gibberish.

IT was a siege; and the aviators knew it, the outcome sadly against them. Now and then a threatening stone came flying toward them, warning them to be careful of exposure. For the time being there was nothing to be done but keep a close watch and save their ammunition.

"Savages of a very low order have been known to be very inconsistent in their purposes," observed Dunlap. "Perhaps these creatures may tire of this presently and go away."

"Oh, if such a glorious idea would enter into their lovely heads," came from Dick.

Presently Dunlap's observation seemed about

to be borne out; for first a few, then a larger number began to move away with deliberation, and disappeared around the upper river bend. The rest, however, stayed where they were, exposing themselves more and more, lulled into evident carelessness or ignorance of the destructive power of the men's weapons.

"Looks as if you are wrong," commented Franklin. "They are up to something that bodes no good for us."

Feeling quite safe, however, from a frontal attack, the three relaxed somewhat, although keeping a close lookout. The ape-men had ceased their stone throwing, but were lolling about, carrying on a continuous gibberish, occasionally brandishing their clubs and grimacing in their direction.

"They are certainly in love with us," spoke the ever jocular Dick. "Look what sweet faces they are making at us." He threw a mock kiss at the ape-men.

"Better keep your fool head and fat body out of sight, you idiot," caustically warned Dunlap. "They know a fat juicy steak on the hoof when they see it."

"Oh, well, we'll just sizzle together," and he grinned broadly, his fine teeth showing.

The ledge on which they were sheltered extended about three feet beyond the upper edge of the bluff. As mentioned before, the cliff immediately above the ledge was concaved, giving them a great measure of protection. But there was no way to obtain a footing from then on to the top. And the distance from the top of the cliff to their ledge was altogether too great a drop, even should any of their enemies take it into their heads to attack from that quarter. So while they were in a trap, still there was no way for the enemy to reach them, that they could see. They held an impregnable fortress.

Fortunately they had enough food with them which by strict economy would last them several days, and their thirst could be slaked by a tiny trickle of water which dripped from the arched rock over their shelter. For the time being at least the men could breathe with a fair measure of safety.

They sat down under the arched lee of their protecting cliff discussing their dreadful predicament, frequently creeping to the edge of their position to see that none of their besiegers ventured too near. As Captain Franklin lay face down peering down at the enemy, a sudden rustle involuntarily caused him to draw back with a jerk. And well for him that he did so, for the next instant a huge boulder, which must have weighed a quarter of a ton, came down from the top and striking the very spot where his head had been a moment before, crashed into fragments with a thundering noise, small pieces showering them from the violence of the fall.

Franklin's face went deadly pale, beads of perspiration on his forehead. None spoke a word, shocked by the narrowly escaped tragedy. A pandemonium of howling cries broke loose, the ape-men dancing about in wild glee.

"So that was what they were up to," he remarked presently. "That bunch that went up the bend must have climbed the low bluffs there and got to our position immediately above us."

From then on they had to use greater caution than ever, for the slightest exposure brought down a huge boulder, accompanied by many savage yells of delight. It must have been great fun for the ape-men.

CHAPTER III

The Home of the Ape-Men

"I AM going to pick off one of those babies," declared Dick, who was an excellent marksman. "Perhaps one will oblige us by falling down on our ledge, and our professor here can be served with the delight of seeing one of those 'pithecanthrowbangs' at close sight." Saying which he edged forward on his back, his rifle trained at the top of the cliff. The next moment he fired, and amidst a chorus of yells one of the ape-men came hurtling down from above, landing with great force right at their feet, shot through the head—stone dead.

"There you are, professor," he laughed, "look your specimen over; hope you live to report your findings to the scientific journals."

The creature was indeed a forbidding thing to look at with his hairy muscular legs, his altogether human torso, hairy, powerful; his immense shoulders and bulging arms,—but that bestial face, with the great protruding jaw, those terribly frowning supra-orbital ridges, the flattened nose, and low, receding forehead. It made one shudder. One could scarcely repress a feeling that here lay a man, bestial of face, yet still a man; and yet—and yet—one could hardly feel it was altogether human.

It seemed more as if the Great Sculptor had not quite finished, leaving much, here and there, rough and imperfect. In his huge hairy hand, the dead ape-man still clutched his powerful club, a sharp rock tied to the end with sinewy thongs. And still held in place by the strip of some animal skin, which formed the belt around his waist, protruded a sharp, knife-like flint, no doubt used for cutting. Clearly the ape-men were tool-using animals, crude but far from unintelligent. His kind no doubt belonged to the humanoid stem, but were of a different genus, and far from *Homo sapiens*.

After Dick's shot had brought one of them down, the rest kept out of range. Their intelligence, their powers of reason and mental association was thus attested, for undoubtedly they associated the thunder-like reports of the firearms with quick death. From then on they were more wary.

As the day began to draw to a close, and the sounds of the hunting animals of the night began to be heard, the ape-men withdrew by twos and threes and small groups; and shortly after, the last one disappeared behind the river bend. For the time being the three aviators were relieved.

In the darkness of the primeval night which surrounded the trapped men, they discussed their situation and made plans for the morrow—pro-

viding the ape-men did not return to the attack with the first approach of day. After a first impulse to flee the spot, all three decided that for the present the safest place was where they were. In the morning they would see.

"Come to think about it," spoke Captain Franklin, "I am wondering if those savages live somewhere up the river front. If so, perhaps we can get to their encampment or village or whatever it be, by following the river instead of venturing through the dangerous jungle. The jungle avenue may be just a short cut. We might locate our plane that way with less danger."

"By jove, you may be right," agreed Dunlap. "Nothing like trying."

"I would suggest," continued Franklin, "that with the first break of dawn we go up the valley to the break in the bluffs and get on top of this cliff over our ledge. It seems to be the highest spot around here; and by climbing one of those tall trees up there we may obtain the layout of the land. We can then decide what best to do."

With the first streak of dawn, after a watchful night during which each took turns on guard, they ventured down from the safety of their perch, every sense alert to the slightest sign of danger. Swiftly yet cautiously they moved up stream where the break in the bluffs made an easy ascent. Climbing to the top, they doubled back and soon reached the top of the cliff which looked down on their sheltering ledge fully fifty feet below. There was not the slightest sign of the presence of any of the ape-men, although there were many lurking beasts.

While the other two stood guard, Franklin quickly climbed to the top of a tall rasamala tree, and soon obtained a comprehensive layout of the territory. It was just as he had surmised. The river swept around the bend to the east, bent south, then doubled back northwest and north again in a great sweeping turn forming an immense loop. There was every indication that the way through the forest was just a short cut to the river-front on the north side of the loop, where, as seemed quite likely, the ape-men were domiciled.

TWO hours later, the venturers came to a wide break in the cliff walls some hundreds of yards in extent, where the jungle growth appeared. Here another broad, well-trodden opening, similar to the one on the south side of the loop, led out unto the river bank. And there, plain as could be, were the tell-tale marks of the airplane on the ground leading out of the jungle and pointing to the left up the river. So far they seemed to be on the right track.

As they rounded the north sweep of the river loop, behind some jutting masses of rocks which hid them from view, there came to their ears the far-off sounds which they recognized as emanating from the ape-men. Hugging close to the shelter of the bluffs, which here again rose to a great heights, they stole around the bend; and there, to their astonished eyes, was the abiding-place of the savage horde—and in the center of a large open sandy space near the river, *rested the long-sought-for plane!*

The three men could scarcely repress a feeling of triumphant exultation; they could have shouted for sheer joy at their discovery. But the next instant this feeling was dashed into icy coldness at the realization of the sheer difficulty of recovering the missing plane, so tantalizingly near. It was there all right; but what chance had they, armed though they were, against that wild horde of savage man-like beasts with their powerful clubs and fast hurtling, cunningly delivered stones.

What even if they killed a number in the attempt; the rest would surely get them. And what assurance had they that the plane was in flying condition? Perhaps those creatures had damaged and destroyed the vital parts, or at least rendered it unfit for flying. Their hearts sank within them.

A few hundred feet back in the direction from which they came, they had noticed the river bed was partly dry and rocky, great flat rocks jutting above the water, which here was at a low level, affording an easy crossing at that spot.

Acting on Dunlap's suggestion, they forded the river out of sight of the horde; and entering the jungle fringe which reached almost to the water's edge, turned left and cautiously moved along the bank, all the time keeping themselves completely out of sight behind the sheltering bush.

Arriving directly opposite the home of the ape-men, and stretched prone behind the thick foliage, they peered out and beheld a sight such as no living man had ever seen.

A wide sandy beach here lay before the high terraced banks of the river; and on the various levels of the high rocky bluffs or cliffs, some two hundred feet from the river's edge, there were many cave-like openings and large fissures in the rocky walls; the terraced broad ledges affording a safe lookout, the caves a home and shelter for these half-men creatures.

Between the bluffs and the river, in the center of the wide and long open space, rested the plane. The cliff-dwellings of the ape-men faced north, overlooking this straight-away stretch of river front, which here ran for three or four hundred yards east and west, from the bend near the ford to another bend in the river further up.

The ape-men were moving about to and fro or lolling on the ground or on the high terraces in front of their cave dwellings. Some were climbing up or down; others were engaged in scraping skins or industriously pounding away at the crude manufacture of their simple tools. So far as could be made out, they did not seem to know the use of fire.

The creatures were no doubt on the very bottom rung of achievement—a mere step removed from the lower animals. Except for the belt which the males wore, the ape-men went completely naked. The females also were totally devoid of any covering whatsoever, except for some necklaces made of shells or bone. In that they betrayed their human, even though remote kinship.

For the rest they were simply beasts, often snarling and growling at one another. At times, and for reasons which the observers could not

make out, a sudden rumpus would ensue between two of the males; and there would be much grimacing and gibbering; and in one instance resulted in a battle royal, a circle of the ape-men watching the contestants till one of them dropped with a crushed skull from contact with the pile-driving blow of a war club. After which there was much gibbering and excitement; but soon all was quiet again. A life did not matter so much after all.

A Strategic Plan

A MORE amusing sight was the sudden fierce tilt between two of the females, on account of some altercation between two of the ape-children. After a prolonged series of squeals and threatening grimaces, the two went at each other tooth and claw. Eventually they were separated by some of the males, each receiving resounding cuffs; and the net result was another deadly struggle between two of the males—husbands perhaps of the two females.

"Human, all too human," whispered Dick.

The youngsters frolicked about. the very little ones were carried on the hips of their mothers. Farther up, where the river showed in spots, some of the ape-urchins were leaping from rock to rock, a few of the more venturesome going almost clear across the river—only to be recalled by sharp commands or receive severe cuffs for venturing into forbidden territory. No doubt danger lurked in the jungle across the river.

As far as the men could make out from their station, the plane appeared unharmed. Except for the glass in the cabin windows and the wind shields, which were all broken, and many scratches and dents from rough treatment, *The Golden Gate* as a whole seemed to have suffered no vital damage.

Ape-urchins were gamboling and chasing each other in and out of the plane, or clambering over the wings and body. Underneath its wide-spreading wings lolled a dozen or more ape-men, shading themselves from the hot sun. Some were amusing themselves by turning the propellers; others now and then would poke or pound idly against the plane with their clubs. And all as they came and went paused frequently in wonder and astonishment to study this strange bird-like metal thing. Plainly they were puzzled by the meaning of it. In spite of their predicament the bird-men could scarcely repress smiles at the bewildered interest of the man-like creatures. At times when the handling of the machine grew somewhat rough, the men almost groaned, and could scarce resist a desire to fire into the horde and attempt a forcible seizure, but prudence held them in check.

"If only those savage creatures would desert this place for a short while," groaned Dunlap in a whisper.

The three observers lay there in an agony of helpless despair. Their situation was desperate and seemed utterly hopeless. And the nearness of their airplane, which meant escape and freedom, was exasperatingly enticing and almost drove them mad. If only they could think of something that would drive this wild horde away from the spot long enough to make away with the plane. They gritted their teeth in silent rage.

What was to be done? How outwit the ape-man and regain possession of their machine. Plainly something had to be done—and soon. But what—and how! Nor was their present concealed post any too secure. At any moment some prowling animal creeping upon them out of the terrors of the jungle at their back might force them to defend themselves and thereby betray their presence to the ape-men—and thus bring about another chase, this time perhaps a fatal one. For a long time they silently lay there, wretched, helpless and despairing.

At Franklin's whispered suggestion, they decided to move on and investigate the territory still farther up the river beyond the next bend. Carefully they skirted the jungle edge, following the bank till it swung again to the north, taking them out of sight and sound of the ape-men's abiding-place. Here they halted. The same unbroken jungle was at their back, the bluffs on the west side of the river falling almost to a level with the banks, giving way to dense forest growths which reached to the water's edge. The river here was very shallow and partly dry, affording an easy crossing.

"I HAVE an idea," whispered Captain Franklin. "Perhaps it may work. perhaps not. The idea may appear childishly foolish, but under these primitive circumstances it is well worth trying."

Eagerly the other two crowded close and listened attentively.

"As I see it, there is one thing to do—create some diversion that will draw these ape-men away from the vicinity of the plane long enough for us to grab it and make a take-off." He paused and his friends eyed him questionably, wondering what it could be he had in mind that could possibly bring about the miracle of such a diversion. A dubious expression rested on their faces.

"As you notice," Franklin continued, "the river here is very low and easily forded. Suppose we go back first to our ledge and get that alarm clock we retrieved in the jungle, cross over from here to the west side of the river and there set the clock ringing at some distance above the ape-men's abiding-place, timing it to ring, however, after we shall have retraced our steps close to the other ford below. These creatures are no doubt possessed of compelling curiosity, as are all creatures of the anthropoid or humanoid stem; and they may take it into their heads to investigate the source of the strange ringing sound, most likely utterly new to their ears, and thereby give us our chance."

After a moment's pause, Ray Dunlap spoke in a doubting tone.

"What, even if your scheme does work, and we get to the machine but cannot start it before we are spied—they may have put the engines out of commission."

(*Continued on Page 282*)

The Martian Nemesis

by **George B. Beattie**

(Illustration by Marchioni)

As I watched, I noticed a circle of the monsters surrounded the rock, their pitchers opening and shutting spasmodically as they waved toward it.

THEY laid him to rest in the bare gaunt abbey of Westminster. To rest with the great—this greatest one of them all. The city was muffled. The women wept: the men whispered in low tones, and the children stopped in their play as the cortege passed solemnly by. Sir Stewart Knightlow was dead: Knightlow the magnetic, the man with the charmed life, and the tragic history.

Curious what an influence the name of Knightlow had exerted during the past couple of decades: man, woman and child had followed his exploits. The men had honored him for his achievements, the women had pitied him for the pathos of his private life, but to the children, he was the super-hero, the worshipful one: the speed king, holder of all the records on land and water, and in the air: the master adventurer, the only man who had trodden on the soil of Mars and returned to the earth alive.

And now he was dead, slain in a simple street accident, this greatest of all explorers, before whose star the adventures of Cortez and Columbus paled ineffectually. Knightlow dead? It seemed incredible, even as the funeral procession wound slowly by, and they laid his bones beneath the "dull cold marble."

In the privacy of his home, the dead man's lawyer fingered contemplatively a bulky package. He mumbled the direction: "To be opened only after my death. Stewart Knightlow, Bart.," appearing on the envelope, stroked his chin once or twice as if trying to gauge the contents of the document without opening the cover. Then suddenly, he ripped open the seals, and drew out many pages of closely written matter, headed in Sir Stewart's bold hand-writing, "My Life."

Seating himself in his most comfortable armchair, the old lawyer turned over the pages and read, at first with the semi-boredom of professional duty, then increasing interest and horror.

* * * *

So this was Mars! Our quantum-control space ship had made a perfect landing, and we could see through our window-like lenses stretches of desert on either side of us, waterless and inhospitable. Above, the sky was clear and cloudless, like that of the "land of azure blue," as the Riviera is poetically called, but the firmament seemed higher, the light more intense, and the blue more vivid as it contrasted sharply with the bright red earth that extended as far as we could view, in a monotonous flat plain. The sun beat down fiercely on the ruby desert, which seemed to glow red-hot in response, a very sea of fire. Awkroyd, the climatologist had been taking readings. He uttered a low whistle.

"What d'you think of this boys?" he asked excitedly lapsing into his native Irish brogue, "Faith, the astronomers are wrong entoirely about timperature. Moind you, the barometric pressure is about right: it's about wan quarter that of the earth, just as Campbell supposed, an' the later investigations into the composition of the atmosphere aren't too wide of the mark, oither.

"The atmosphere's made up of 80 per cent oxygen, about foive per cent carbon dioxide, about foive per cent nitrogen, about foive per cent helium, and the remainder consists of rare gases such as argon and krypton, an' a lot I canot diagnose at all. But as for the timperature: Poynting put it at well below freezing point, an' my thermometer shows a hundred an' fifty two deg. Fahrenheit in the shade."

"That's easily accounted for," put in Ray Browne, the naturalist, with that patronizing air I detested so, "here we are under the direct rays of the sun, in the middle of a dry desert beside which the Sahara is a children's playground. There's not a drop of water anywhere, nor will there be until the polar cap melts. Even then, the water will simply flow into the irrigation canals and be swallowed up by the thirsty plants that extend for miles on either side of their banks.

"To conduct the heat away from the land, we

GEO. B. BEATTIE

BEHIND the scenes of every scientific expedition there is a human drama which for its sheer interest may even outweigh at times the purpose of the expedition itself. But if, in a story, the human drama—the conflict of man against man—and the struggle of man against nature is so evenly balanced, then the story becomes superb reading. Of such a calibre is the present, from the pen of a rising star in the heavens of science fiction.

Man seeking to conquer strange worlds must put himself in the same position as a Martian on reaching the earth. Every plant, every living thing would be foreign to him. He might eat the poisonous fruits because they looked good, he would be stung by snakes, attacked by all manner of wild beasts. The more abundant the plant and animal life the greater the chance of his coming to grief and destruction.

In the most realistic fashion Mr. Beattie gives us not only the struggle of earthlings against the hostile Martian plant life but also a human story that will touch the most cold-blooded.

would need huge seas all round this desert. Wait till night, you'll find it cold enough then. Why even in a puny waste like Higher Mesopotamia, during the Arabic war, our water used to freeze solid in our water-bottles at night, and yet in the day, our chaps were dying with heat-stroke. The fellow who promised his sweetheart he would be true, till the sands of the desert ran cold, was making a safe bet. They go cold at Christmas every night."

An Expedition Formed

HOW I hated the young pup's braggadocio, and his cheap cynicism. And this was the fellow Mary was going to marry, the man she had asked me to care for on this hazardous trip, this cynical upstart, this young know-all. I cursed the day he had ever come to our quiet little village. Before he came, Mary had been interested in my work, and I had hoped that one day she would be interested in *me*. True there was some difference in our ages, and I know I loked ten years older than I really was, for a decade spent in investigating radio-active elements had left its indelible mark.

At thirty-four I walked with a decided stoop, my face was lined and furrowed, my eyesight was beginning to fail, and, although I managed to conceal the defect, I knew myself that I was gradually becoming deaf. Many a day, I felt like throwing up the sponge, but always I seemed to be on the threshold of an epochal discovery, and Mary's sweet sympathy kept me going. After all, I owed all to her father, good old Squire Lowell: he had first noticed my keen interest in science when I was a boy at the village school, and had guided me through college and university, for I was an orphan, and without his generosity must have spent my life as a plough-boy or a grocer's assistant.

Later he had fitted me up a laboratory, and I had tried to justify his confidence in me by working night and day. But of late, I knew that I had worked not for duty, but for love. When I made some minor success, such as when I discovered how to separate the rare earths from actinium, Mary seemed so overjoyed that I felt I could hope. Some day I *must* bring off a coup, and then I would speak. In the meantime, I went on, working and hoping.

And then, *he* came. Perhaps five years my junior, he looked hardly more than twenty, pink-cheeked, well groomed, straight as a die, athletic and empty. In fact everything I was not. He could dance, I didn't. He played a good game of tennis: I had neither time nor inclination. He had a smart little runabout, with a shouty mascot on the radiator, and he talked with a cheap empty cynicism in a gay talking manner. Such was Ray Browne, the naturalist.

He came, he saw, he conquered. Mary's visits to the laboratory began to be less frequent, and when she came, she seemed to have left her mind in another place, (Ray Browne's runabout). At length the blow fell, the engagement was announced. I wished them luck, in the mechanical hypocritical manner that passes for politeness, and buried myself in my laboratory, working harder than ever. But the whole place seemed haunted with memories. I could not concentrate however hard I tried. I felt I must get away at all costs.

Then came the announcement of the projected Martian expedition. The German astronomer, Ostwald had spent his whole life investigating Mars, and following up the studies of Lowell and Schiaparelli. * He had constructed a super-telescope by which he could not only detect the broad bands of vegetation growing on either side of the hundreds of canals, which bands are usually thought by the layman to be the canals themselves, but he was enabled to see the water flow down these canals as the ice at the poles melted, and he was able to note great changes in the vegetation following this irrigation.

But what interested me most was his declaration that by means of new instruments he had discovered that much of the surface of the planet was radio-active. Ostwald had learned all that was possible to know of Mars, without visiting the planet itself. For years he had studied Mars, talked Mars, dreamed Mars, and although at the age of sixty he had given up hope of ever visiting the planet himself, he fully believed that in time means would be devised for bridging the gulf between the two worlds.

Stock's wonderful adaptation of the quantum theory to practical engineering, and the building of the first quantum-control space flier, however, caused the old scientist once more to indulge in his life's dream of visiting the red planet in person. Funds were raised, and to make a long story short, a larger quantum-control vessel was constructed and the Ostwald Martian Expedition formed. How the public laughed at the cranks, as they called them: the more serious-minded members of the community tried to get legislative acts passed to prevent, as they put it, a group of lunatics from committing suicide.

To me, it was a heaven-sent opportunity. I could not stay in the little village, the wreck of all my hopes. Besides, all my life I had dabbled in the infinitely little, the atoms and electrons: here was an opportunity for adventure in the infinitely great, the boundless extent of space. I crossed to Coburg, presented my credentials to Herr Ostwald, and was engaged as radiologist to the expedition. But, somehow, I could not go away, without staying good-bye to Mary. I made my way to the little village once again, and on to the manor house, seeking an audience.

I WAS ushered into the morning room. Old Squire Lowell was there, cheery and rubicund. Young Browne was leaning nonchalantly on that quaint old fashioned harpsichord which was such a delight to Mary, tapping random notes idly, like the asinine dolt he was. As I entered, both men looked slightly strained, as though their conversation had been suddenly chopped off. I had caught the word "settlement" as I came down the hall. So that was it, the bounder was after Mary for her money and social position.

"Ah ha!" said Brown. "Enter the great elec-

* The two astronomers who had brought the "Martian Canals" before the world.

tron hunter. What have you been doing with yourself, old scollop? Haven't seen you for ages and how's Mr. Nucleus, Mrs. Proton and all the little Electrons? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blithering idiot!" I thought to myself.

"Yes, Stewart, what have you been doing with yourself lately? We haven't seen you for weeks. Mary's been quite concerned for you," put in the Squire.

"Well, Squire, I've been to Germany. There's a golden opportunity for me on the Ostwald expedition. I've been appointed radiologist on the Martian expedition."

The squire brought his fist down with a wallop on the table. "The devil you have? Well of all the— well I'm blest—"

Browne struck a mock-heroic attitude, picked up my soft felt hat and placed it aslant on his head, then tucking his right hand into the folds of his jacket, he chortled "I go, 'tis a far far better thing than I have ever done."

At that moment Mary entered, her eyes blazing. "Ray, I'm ashamed of you. Mr. Knightlow is setting out on a voyage of unprecedented peril, and you sneer in that silly manner."

To do him credit, Browne colored up and looked decidedly silly for a moment or two, but he quickly recovered his usual sang-froid. Not so the Squire. He sat frowning for some time, chewing the end of his cigar as if weighing up the pros and cons of some mighty matter, and finally delivered himself:—"Mr. Browne, you're engaged to my daughter. You've got many things desirable in this world, personality, a comely frame, a flippant wit and a deuced taking way, but I'm beginning to think you lack one essential!"

"And what is that, oh Squire?"

"Well, it's what's commonly called 'guts,' my lad! You can sneer at Knightlow, but you haven't the guts to emulate him."

"I'm not such an ass, you mean, sir."

"Call it what you will, my lad," said the squire testily, "but unless you accompany the Ostwald expedition, the engagement's off. You say you are a naturalist. Very well, we'll be able to get you into the swim all right. Refuse and . . . "

"But father," put in Mary. "I love him. You are sending him to his death. I won't let him go. I'll marry him in spite of your refusal."

And then I almost liked Ray Browne. He turned to Mary. "Do you think I could take you on those terms. Your father thinks I am a coward. He has thrown down the gauntlet to me, and I must accept. I must prove myself. I must win my spurs!"

CHAPTER II

Radium!

RELUCTANTLY Mary entrusted her lover to my care, and at the very last hour I made her the solemn promise that I would guard him and that he would be returned to her, all safe and sound.

But as the voyage progressed my dislike of Browne increased. To his other despicable habits he had added one of calling me "Dad," which made me boil with rage, for truth to tell my greying hair and wrinkling face were matters about which I was particularly sensitive, but here we were at last, in the heart of the red desert.

How lonely it was. The barren emptiness was unbroken even by a solitary vulture or carrion crow. It was clearly no ideal camping ground, but Professor Ostwald and Awkroyd were intent upon their calculations, and were not a little annoyed by Browne's perpetual chatter, and his oft reiterated suggestions that we "shove off to more Christian quarters."

"What strikes me as most interesting," announced the professor when they had concluded their tests, "is the remarkably low nitrogen content of the atmosphere. We shall, no doubt, be able to breathe all right, quite comfortably, in fact; for although the oxygen content is four times that we are accustomed to from a percentage standpoint, the pressure is only one quarter. The carbon dioxide percentage is high, but equally as the pressure is low, we should not suffer on that account. The depressing effect of a low barometric pressure should, equally, be nullified by the great proportion of oxygen in the atmosphere. We may therefore safely land in the cool of the evening."

As the sun receded, we stole from the vessel. The somewhat lighter gravity affected our steps strangely at first, but we quickly mastered it, as we did the breathing of the rarefied air. But our reconnaissance yielded little, merely serving to confirm our first impressions of an arid inhospitable waste, totally without life, either animal or vegetable, and we were all quite glad to get back on board the space-ship, and spend the remainder of the evening discussing future movements.

We finally came to the conclusion that the best course was to cruise over this hemisphere, making maps and notes as we went, and then to attempt a landing in a more hospitable locality, if such presented itself. We cruised for several days, taking photographs of the light areas and dark patches, the wonderful canals with their broad bands of exotic vegetation: now at the icebound pole, now by the equator. Everywhere was desolate even in the vegetational bands, for the time of the polar cap melting was approaching, and the plants and trees were brown or leafless. No sign of human life appeared, although Ash the photographer claimed to have seen a curious quadruped scuttle across the dried bed of one of the canals.

At last we had every square mile of the hemisphere mapped out and photographed even to Herr Ostwald's satisfaction, and we decided again to land, this time in a narrow barren space between the two channels of a fine geminated canal that extended in this double formation right to the pole. We cruised very low over the canal and its vegetational belts, with the rotting trees and fast decaying leaves all matted with masses of tangled linas below us. Now and then we caught sight of Ash's quadrupeds, dart-

ing in and out of the dead forest. Curious creatures these, about the size of a terrier, with slug-like bodies on long thin stilts, one could hardly call them legs.

Landing, we each set about our own particular branch of the work. Browne, with an interest I had not thought him capable of spent his days foraging in the "maquis" of rotting vegetation, picking up a rhizome or bulb here and there to stuff in his satchel, or making a drawing or pressing of some more than ordinarily interesting leaf or stem. The animals proved to be quite harmless and timid to a degree: they appeared to exist on the decaying vegetable matter, and scuttled off when anyone approached into the heart of the scrub. But that there was a huge number of them could not be doubted.

Browne's researches puzzled him. "Nearly all these plants," he confessed to Ostwald "seem to me to require plenty of nitrogenous matter for their substance; yet the quantity of nitrogen in the air and the soil is negligible. True, the decaying matter does form a minor source of supply, but it seems altogether inadequate when we consider the probable immensity of some of the growths from the skeletonised leaves that lie about."

To which the old professor replied that we should know the answer to the riddle when the polar ice melted. We did, all too tragically!

While Browne examined his roots and shoots, I carefully examined the bright red earth, and the few boulders that cropped up in it. For a long time I could make nothing of either, but my heart pounded with excitement when I found that the red earth was a complete insulator for all radium emanations, and that below it, nay, within it specimens of every radio-active substance I had ever encountered on earth, and many new ones existed. I could hardly believe my own findings, and hastened along to Ostwald to apprise him of the news. The old professor however, was taking his siesta, and I was loath to disturb him, so I returned to my work.

AS I worked, I thought things out, and as I thought, I was tempted. All my life I had been poor. Here I had inexhaustible wealth for the picking. Why not keep the knowledge to myself? I was the only one who had the necessary technical accomplishment to wrest the Martian earth's secrets from it! I could refine a large quantity of the earth, and take it back to the vessel without anyone being any the wiser: with radium at over a hundred dollars a milligramme element, I should be the richest man on earth.

Perhaps Mary would look at me then. Besides, if I reported to Ostwald now, he would get all the credit, for I was but a link in the chain of the Ostwald Expedition, and I was sick to death of work, work, work, without recognition.

"Any luck, Knightlow?" I started at the sound. The professor was bending over me as I examined a fresh heap of the red earth. "Er . . . well, no, professor, the earth is practically inert!" I said masking a lie with a partial truth, but I felt the color mount to my cheeks, and I feel to this day that the old German knew I was lying, although if he did, he appeared to take my statement at its face value. He walked silently away.

For days I worked, extracting radium and its isotope, mesothorium, encasing the precious grains in a safety envelope of the ray-insulating red earth, and placing them in my satchel. In a short while I had more radium stored away in the space-ship than there was in the whole of the world, but to every inquiry as to my work I gave a negative reply, and cultivated an air of disappointment as I examined heap after heap of earth, ostensibly without result.

But though I carried the matter with a high hand, my duplicity worried me: I grew restless at nights, and many a time resolved as I tossed, sleepless, that I would make a clean breast of the affair to Ostwald in the morning and hand over the priceless booty. But such resolves melted like snow before the rising sun each morning and I continued furtively to accumulate my treasure.

Meanwhile the polar snows were melting, and the vegetational region was permeated with a light mist, although the deserts remained as dry, and the sky as cloudless as ever. Once we ascended in the space ship, and soared over the canal. Its basin was a deep gorge, lined with withered hydrophytes and strange algae. A puny stream of water trickled feebly down the centre of the canyon, and as the sun beat down on it we saw the water boil vigorously, for of course under such a low barometric pressure, the boiling point was low in the scale, and the water boiled when it was merely warm.

The vapor produced the light haze we had seen, which was diffused rapidly in the rare atmosphere and spread wide over the vegetational belt.

The vegetable debris seemed to be awakening. Previously the only plants which had seemed to be alive at all, were Xerophytes of the most extreme type, much resembling our own cushion plants and spiny plants of the desert, and minute aromatic posies with grey hairy leaves, which the quadrupeds avoided like the plague, probably due to the strong perfume emanating from them.

Now new shoots of tender green were springing up in every direction, growing with a rapidity which to our earthly notions were incredible, or at any rate, uncanny. Browne was almost enthusiastic: he was as near excitement as his blasé temperament permitted, and when we had returned to our base, he spent his time on the fringe of the bush examining the strange shoots, and culling a specimen here and there.

"Why, man!" he said to me, "There's a wealth and diversity of vegetation here such as our most imaginative naturalists have never dreamed of. The most primitive types of palaeobotany rub shoulders with evolutionary types that are far ahead of anything we have produced by cultivation. What a treatise I can produce. Another month, and we shall have the most wonderful forest ever seen around us."

The Trap!

THE days succeeded one another, and Browne's enthusiasm grew with the plants. He pushed further and further into the bush, but his hunger for knowledge seemed insatiable. His notebooks were full of closely written comments, and his satchel was already brimful of leaves, and cuttings, bulbs and stems, all carefully docketed and classified to the best of his ability.

The scrub was now well above waist high, and was so interlaced with vines and creepers as to be almost impenetrable already. Browne had been importuning Professor Ostwald for some time to allow an expedition to proceed through the bush to the canal itself, so that a more perfect study of the vegetation might be made, but the old German was very reluctant to consent.

He pointed out the dangers of such a course. It was ten miles from the fringe of the maquis to the water basin; we had no knowledge of how gigantic the vegetable growths might be on maturity, and judging by the interlacing of the creepers already, in another month the belt would be absolutely impenetrable; while as there was no suitable landing place for the space-ship at the canal gorge, escape by that means would be extremely hazardous if not impossible, and the party might be forced to remain marooned until the vegetation decayed;—the best part of the Martian year.*

But at long length, Browne, with the assistance of Awkroyd and Ash, who were a couple of adventurous spirits, and were mightily bored with our present life of inaction, prevailed upon the old scientist to allow this expedition to proceed. At first it was intended to carry radio apparatus with them, but after the first day's progress through the scrub, the idea of carrying anything apart from tabloid foods and a light bivouac was abandoned, for it was with extreme difficulty that the three adventurers managed to hack their way through the tough vines, which seemed automatically to seal the way again as they passed through.

We had all lent a hand for the first day's progress, yet barely a couple of miles had been traversed, and as the professor, Bell, the pilot, Stock, the engineer, and myself, cut our way back again, lugging the wireless apparatus with us, we felt glad that we were not proceeding with the others.

The four of us contented ourselves in taking things easily, ascending some days to see how the adventurous three were getting along. As they proceeded, they found themselves in a thicket growing denser, higher and more luxuriant, and it was a full fortnight before they reached the canal basin. There they made themselves comfortable, and having furnished them with a further supply of food by dropping it from the air, we started to make things more amenable on the fringe of the bush. For some time Herr Ostwald had grumbled about living and sleeping in the space-flyer, so to placate the old man, Bell and myself set about constructing a habitation of sorts from the old wood and the huge leaves which were now growing on the very fringe of the thicket. A curious vine, not unlike Virginian creeper, had been throwing out tendrils in the direction of the space-ship for some time, and with a thought of the artistic, I trained the pretty vine over the improvised cottage, which gave the rough results of our labors a picturesque aspect. Ostwald was delighted with his new dormitory, and as the vine grew with astonishing rapidity, it had soon covered the whole exterior of the shed, much to the old man's delight, for he was greatly taken with pretty things. Our surroundings were daily growing more pleasant.

Some of the strange growths were already beginning to flower, and vivid colored petals were bursting through the galaxy of green. The belt too, was slowly increasing, proceeding it seemed, towards us, as new shoots would arise in the desert; and soon the space-flier was surrounded with a charming little garden of these pleasant young off-shoots springing up within a few yards of each other.

Stock, who had some pretentions to gardening ability, pottered about with these plants, attempting to train them in the way they should go. He was particularly interested in a nettle-like bush which gave promise of huge dimensions. Bell hadn't much sympathy with all this "messing about" as he termed it. He was pre-eminently a man of action and was bored stiff.

I had now accumulated as much radium as I dared store away, and like Bell I was suffering somewhat from ennui; when one night, taking a stroll on the fringe of the forest by the feeble light of Mars' "waistcoat-pocket" moons, Phobos and Deimos, we saw something which dispelled all our thoughts of boredom.

FOR some time I had been noting a clump of peculiar plants, with a passive interest. That they belonged to the Nepenthes (pitcher plant) group, even I, ignorant though I was on matters relating to botany, could not doubt. But they were many times the size of any pitcher plant, I had ever seen. I had examined them that very morning, and been struck alike with the vivid variegated hues of the immense fused leaves that formed the "pitcher". They were ten feet or so from the ground; and the long trail of sirupy secretion which exuded from the pitcher slowly trickled down the stem and gradually seeped into the earth. Greatly daring I had gingerly tasted the secretion, and found it sweet like honey.

We had just reached this clump, and were perhaps a distance of twenty yards away, when we noted one of Ash's quadrupeds at the foot of the clump, licking the sweet secretion from the stem. We immediately stood motionless, for we had never had the opportunity of examining the behavior of the strange animals at such close quarters, and this one was obviously unaware of our presence as yet. Soon it began to ascend the stem of the plant, licking the sweet secretion greedily as it progressed, holding on to the smooth surface with sucker-like toes.

For minutes we watched as the creature slowly progressed towards the pitcher. Once or twice it turned round, as if half aware of our

*The time of revolution of Mars is 686.98 days.

presence. But if it scented danger, the fascination of the honey-dew proved too great, for it continued climbing and sipping the nectar with obvious relish until it was balanced on the very edge of the bi-foliate pitcher. Then suddenly, and without a shred of warning, the pitcher opened like a butterfly's wings: blood red tentacles sprang from the centre and enfolded the luckless animal with the rapidity of a chameleon's tongue, and the leaves instantly closed with the booty inside.

The whole operation of the trap had been so nearly instantaneous that, had I witnessed it alone, I should have been persuaded that my senses had deceived me; but I could see from the horrified look on Bell's face, that he too had seen the horrible process.

"What'ye make o' that?" he queried.

"Well," I said as lightly as I could, "I'm no botanist but it seems to me it's the solution of Browne's puzzle as to how plants requiring nitrogenous matter thrive here. Evidently Nature, cruel as ever, allows the animals to breed and feed on the decaying plants, and when the young plants attain maturity they complete the cycle by feeding on the animals, and so making up for the nitrogen shortage in the soil."

"Anyway, let's go back," he said with a shudder, "And talk the matter over with Stock, he's something of an amateur botanist."

CHAPTER III

Tragedy!

WE encountered Stock half way between Ostwald's shed and the vessel. We poured out our tale to him.

"Hum," he said, "They're not true Nepenthes: in the pitcher plants the insects walk up the stem picking up a sweet liquid that exudes from the leaves, but the pitcher is full of liquid into which they fall and are drowned. But, what worries me is that carnivorous plants are usually found only in marshy ground. Now, if such terrible traps can exist on the very fringe of the belt, what terrors are growing in the damp area by the canal itself, watered by the melting snows? We must get in touch with Browne and the others as quick as we can! I'm glad you fellows are back, though, the old man's got an awfully bad touch of fever."

"Fever?"

"Yes, mysterious kind of malady! Called me shortly after you'd gone. Complained of terrible itching. He's covered with a rash from head to toe, can't diagnose the disease though, and I can't get him comfortable. He was trimming that creeper: (the darn thing's nearly closing up the door now), when he first complained."

We hastened to the space-flyer, where Stock had conveyed Ostwald. The old scientist was lying on the couch, twisting and turning almost like a patient in the throes of tetanus. He had torn his clothes to ribbons, and his flesh showed through livid red, with a fiery eruption which was already developing unsightly pustules: his face looked as though corrosive acid had been poured over it; a fluid poured from his sightless eyes; and he raved in a delirium that was pitiable to hear.

We laved the livid flesh with alkaline water and covered the most affected parts with layers of bismuth, but all to no effect. The astronomer continued to get worse, and before the morning broke he had succumbed.

Sad at heart with the loss of our leader, and puzzled and alarmed at the manner of his death, I noticed in the light of the morning that Bell kept scratching the backs of his hands which seemed red and sore. As the day wore on the pilot developed the same symptoms as Ostwald. Stock and I carried him out, and isolated him in an improvised tent, applying what palliatives we could, but Bell continued to get steadily worse.

We racked our brains, and what few reference books there were in the vessel, in an attempt to diagnose the fever, but could neither recall nor discover any known malady resembling the mysterious illness. So far neither Stock nor I showed the slightest symptoms of the infection, but we were now taking the greatest care to avoid contagion. We buried Ostwald in the rich red earth, and wondered how long our comrade Bell would last out.

Suddenly Stock veered around. "I have it! It's that accursed creeper. The beastly thing must be a 'rhus' or 'sumach'. Even on the earth we have some specimens that play havoc with some people. The American poison ivy, *rhus toxicodendron*, for instance harbours a fixed oil in every part of it, stem, leaves, and hair, which is so virulent that even one thousandth of a milligramme placed on the skin, will produce violent pain and destruction of tissue.

"The slightest contact with a person's clothes or even the dust from the dried leaves produces most painful and terrible eruptions, which sometimes occur again and again even when all source of contagion has been destroyed. Now I think this is a similar vine, containing an even more powerful irritant. Poor Ostwald was trimming the creeper and was *directly* affected. Bell was *indirectly* infected through touching the chief's clothing."

"That may be so, but how are *we* immune?"

"For the simple reason that susceptibility to the Rhus poison seems to be an individual matter. The American poison oak, or poison ivy seems to affect one individual, while another goes free. We are evidently immune, else we should have shown symptoms long ago, you especially, for it was you who worked on the creeper at the start."

"Yes, confounded idiot that I was!" I exclaimed bitterly.

"Never mind that," said Stock. "Let's do what we can for Bell although I don't think there's much hope!"

All day we tended the raving pilot, applying the remedies which Stock said were used for sumach poisoning. By nightfall he was sinking fast in spite of our frenzied endeavors, but unlike Ostwald, he seemed to grow calmer as death approached, and finally sank into a peaceful stupor. Towards midnight, the dying man turn-

ed towards us, and quite lucidly asked one of us to bring his satchel from the space-flier: he knew he was dying and wished to straighten up some affair or other.

Stock went, and I talked with the fast-sinking Bell. Then, of a sudden, out of the night went up a horrible yell, that made my heart jump and my face drain of blood. It was Stock's voice and he was calling for help! Help against what?

I DASHED out into the night, but even as I did so Stock staggered towards me. "Don't come any further!" he panted, "I'm done for!" Disregarding his warning, I rushed to him, and assisted him into the circle of light of the tent. His face was distorted with pain; a livid weal stood out on his right cheek; but, most amazing of all, his clothes were covered with sharp quills about three inches in length while several of these stuck in his bare legs and arms, which were already turning black. I made to extract some of these, but he waved me off. "Too late old man, I'm gone in! Take care of yourself, never mind me.

"It's that damned nettle! You know, the big one with the vivid white flowers, the one I had made such a fuss over. I was passing within a yard or two of it, to get Bell's papers, when I felt something strike my cheek, followed by a searing pain: I couldn't help crying out. Then I was stabbed right and left on the arms and legs. I ran towards the tent, but it's too late, old man, the poison's done its work!"

"But a nettle?"

"Quite natural, old man," he gasped, the scientist even at the point of death, "nettles contain two poisons, formic acid which causes the pain, and a smaller quantity of a venom which resembles snake poison. Even on the Earth, there's an Indian nettle with stinging hairs on its surface, which become detached and float into the air, getting into the eyes, nose and throat of anyone coming near, and causing violent irritation and sometimes blindness, while a Javanese type produces convulsions. This Martian nettle is but a development of these prototypes."

I had been carefully extracting the spines, and making Stock as comfortable as I could. Bell had sunk into a coma again. I tried to cheer up Stock.

"It's no use, old man, I'm done! Half an hour at the most. Look after yourself! Don't stir from this tent until daylight, then get into the vessel as quickly as you can and get away. We're in a hotbed of savage plants. No use attempting to save the others: they're bound to be killed long ago by some diabolical *drosera*.

"I see the riddle of Mars clearly now. How there are man-made canals, and yet no evidence of inhabitants. They have all been wiped out with the vile vegetation their labors helped to create. But, I'm wasting precious minutes. Let me tell you how to operate the quantum motors!"

For the best part of an hour, Stock drilled me with every detail of the procedure, his recital interrupted only by spasms of pain. Then suddenly his whole frame quivered violently, and he fell back, dead. I sat a long time as if petrified, and then stole over to Bell. Alas! he was dead also.

I felt hysterical: I would rather have rushed from the place but Stock's warning held me. It still wanted an hour or two of dawn. How I survived the horror of that time, I know not, but never was man more pleased to welcome the dawn than I that night. As soon as it was light, I paid the last tributes to my dead companions, and hastened to the space-boat, giving the lethal nettle a wide berth, although it looked the picture of innocence in the morning light.

I had little difficulty with the controls, for Stock's description had seared itself into my brain. I rose rapidly and soared at a low altitude over the belt. As I did so, a great arm of green seemed to reach from the heart of the forest and attempt to engulf the ship. I swerved, and was lucky to avoid the menace, which I noted had myriads of suckers on its inner surface, for all the world like the tentacle of an octopus.

I hastened on. Stock's advice burned into my mind. "Never mind the others, they must have been killed long ago." Yes, self-preservation that was it: besides, if Browne had perished? Mary? Yes, what was the use of risking my life on a hopeless quest? I soared higher and higher. Yes, I would leave the planet for good!

Then came a revulsion. I *must* find out whether the others had perished or no. I descended again, and made my way to the canal bank following its line carefully until I came to the encampment.

How the spot had changed, since I had last seen it! The water was higher and on either bank a marsh extended, and in this marsh I saw with horror, titanic Nepenthes, with long *pneumatophores* or prop roots, and devices to enable them to float, their huge pitchers waving hungrily in the air. As I watched, I noted that a circle of these monsters surrounded a rock or small island in the midst of the canal, their pitchers opening and shutting spasmodically as they waved towards it.

And on that rock, there was a speck: a man: my God! It was Ray Browne! He was holding his hands to Heaven, and stamping and raving, and laughing and cursing.

The Return!

QUICK as thought, I released a stream of liquid air from the defense discharge tube, and the Nepenthes crumpled up. Ray saw me, and shouted. I cast him a rope, and he tied it about his middle; with a superhuman effort I hauled him aboard as he fainted clean away. Then I fumbled the controls automatically and drew away from the horrible place with an immense acceleration . . .

How long I flew through space without volition, I do not know: but I was recalled to myself by Brown who had slowly recovered, and managed to crawl towards the larder and bring food for the two of us.

How changed he was! Gone was the flippant look. His hair was white and his face was furrowed. "What of the others?" I asked.

He covered his face with his hands. "Killed. Eaten by those monstrous plants. I was the last. How I escaped is a miracle!" We consumed the remainder of our meal in silence. We were both worn out so, having set the autostats in operation to control progress and steering, we both lay down to catch what slumber we could.

I slept fitfully, but Brown, despite what he had been through, appeared to enjoy a deep rest. When I finally awoke he was stll snoring peacefully, and when he at length aroused himself he seemed to be more his old irresponsible detestable self again. His attitude towards me, too, seemed to have suffered subtle change. Where before, he had appeared overwhelmingly grateful to me for saving him from a terrible fate, he now spoke of the incident as though he had done me a great honor by allowing me to rescue him, and all my old dislike of the man began to reassert itself. As the voyage proceeded, his perkiness increased, as did my hate of the fellow. He would persist in bringing Mary's name into the conversation, rubbing salt, as it were, into my raw wound. At times I almost wished, horrible though the thought was, that I had left him to the mercy of the Nepenthes. My nerves were getting the better of me, and his incessant prattle didn't improve my temper. The sooner we reached civilization, the better.

At length we reached the world's atmospheric belt. Now was the time for delicate action. Any fool could sail a space flyer through space, but it was an exceedingly ticklish job to make a neat or even a safe landing, and despite Stock's copious directions, I felt the need of a pilot badly.

I commenced to coast in an ever decreasing spiral, applying the wind-brakes at the same time, and we were really doing very well. My idea was to make a landing in the first reasonable spot available and then to make for the nearest port, rather than to attempt to reach England in the vessel itself.

We had reached a spot perhaps about ten miles above the surface, when all of a sudden we encountered something; an air pocket; a shifting gravity maelstrom, or something, and we were swept now up, now down with terrific force. I totally lost control for a few seconds, and when I regained it, the earth was rising towards us at a terrific rate.

I had merely time to straighten out when we hurtled along the surface throwing up a cloud of dust and careering along madly for some miles before I could bring the vessel to a stop.

"You're some pilot!" sneered Browne.

I said nothing, but bottled up my rage. We disembarked, and viewed our surroundings.

"Durned fine place this to land," groused Browne. It was certainly a desolate spot. A waterless desert as far as I could make out : just flat dull white earth, baked dry with the sun as far as we could see. How hot it was! The supply of water in the space-ship was nearly exhausted, there was certainly not more than a week's supply at the most.

"It's clear we can't stop here," said Browne jauntily. "I reckon the sooner we clear out again, the sooner we'll be dining at the old manor house again."

"Easier said than done," I jerked out, irritated by his manner, "The controls are jammed, and the auxiliary motor's burned out."

"My God!" he ejaculated, "We're sunk!"

"Not exactly," I said. "We have three chances. Finding a copious supply of water before the week's out, being picked up by a passing airplane, or caravan, or repairing the space-boat. If none of these things happen, then we'll die of thirst."

"And all your fault too," he wailed, "Getting the darned thing out of control like that."

A glance at the damaged ship showed that its repair was beyond our resources, at any rate in the limited time. Our hopes then centred on the discovery of water, and a final pick-up. Of food we had sufficient for a long period in the tabloid supplies aboard. We rested in the ship during the heat of the day, but kept a keen look out for any passing plane or caravan. In the cool of the evening we trekked for miles leaving a spoor behind so that we could retrace our steps, but never a sign of water or vegetation could we find, though we searched the country far and wide with the powerful binoculars of the vessel.

Then we tried digging, but deep though we dug in the soft sandy earth, not a trace of the precious fluid could we find, and our exertions, and the powdery earth filling our throats made us more parched and thirsty than ever.

CHAPTER IV

The Last Struggle

AT the end of the third day, the water was low in the demijohn, and our hopes were at zero. Worn out, I lay down to dream of peaceful streams, and long cool summer drinks. I awoke to find Browne standing beside me. The demijohn with its scanty content of priceless liquor stood beside him, while in his hand, he dangled my satchel with its invaluable yet here, valueless contents. He laughed boisterously and long.

"So, my fine fellow," he sneered, "You thought to steal Mary, as you stole the radium, eh? And it took you all your time to save me from the man-eating plants?. Wished you hadn't afterwards, didn't you? Then you could have become a world-force with your pilfered radium, married Mary, and settled down to accept the plaudits of the vulgar, with your clay-feet neatly tucked out of sight in a pair of expensive brogues. Eh?"

He took my breath away. The fellow had stolen my thoughts.

I caught hold of his arm, "By Jove! man, how do you know all this?"

His leer broadened, and he laughed again, insanely. "Those who live in glass houses, er, shouldn't talk in their sleep."

So that was it! It was an old habit of mine

I knew. From boyhood anything troubling me deeply caused me to mutter in my sleep.

"Well," I said sulkily, "I do hate you, Browne. It was you who stole Mary from me, but I *did* save you, after all. If we get out of this, we'll halve the radium, and start fair. Let Mary choose between us of her own free will."

He laughed again in that mad unnerving way. "Quite generous, but I have other methods of division. Here's your radium", he tossed me the satchel, "For what it is worth! I'm quite content with this," and he fondled the demijohn, "and—Mary!"

I made a dart for the bottle, but he held me off. We struggled. He held on to the demijohn. He was weaker than I: I was gradually mastering him, overpowering him, when the tragedy occurred. He kicked out at me with his heavy boot, missed, and crashed his foot right into the bottle smashing it to pieces. For a moment I stood frozen, watching our lives ebbing away, as the thirsty soil lapped up the small pool of liquor, and then I went berserk.

All the months of hating this man: all the bottled up jealousy, all the repressed emotion surged into my brain and crystallised themselves into the one word "Kill."

I seized the spade we had been digging with, and brought it down on his head, again and again, in a very whirlwind of frenzy. I must have killed him with the first blow for he fell like a log, but my fury knew no bounds and only sheer exhaustion caused me to cease my rains of blows.

I fell exhausted. Then and then only, did the realization of what I had done, penetrate to my brain. But, I was glad! How I hated him! If he were alive, I'd kill him again. I laughed hysterically. He had only himself to blame. It was his life or mine. He would have left me to die without water. But I knew deep down in my heart, that these were excuses. I had killed Ray Browne, because I hated him!

All night I lay with eyes wide-open and parched mouth, staring at the broken vessel, and the corpse, alternately cursing and praying. At intervals I would look up at the firmament, and with a curious detachment admire the beautiful display of stars. Then my nerves would overcome me, and I would fall to sobbing like a child.

WITH dawn, my reason somewhat reasserted itself. I hauled Browne to the hole we had dug for water, and pushed him in. He had his satchel slung over his shoulder, and as the body fell the bag burst open, and his precious notes and specimens flew out scattering, about the sides of the improvised grave. I threw in the blood-stained shovel and the broken bottle, and scrambled the loose earth into the hiatus as best I could, smoothing the surface with meticulous care. How thirsty I was!

I shouldered my satchel and made my way to the space-ship, collecting the log and what other records I deemed important enough for preservation. Then I laid a long fuse to the space-ship, and blew her to atoms. Even as I did so, I laughed at the futility of all this covering of my tracks, for here I was in the midst of a waterless desert, dying of thirst, with not one chance in a million of being rescued.

I laughed till my cracked lips bled: and then with a sudden resolve, I pushed on as fast as I could, laughing, cursing, and sobbing as I stumbled through the sandy soil.

* * * *

The old lawyer paused in his reading. He stroked his brow with his hand; gulped down a glass of water nervously, poked up the fire, and then recommenced the narrative.

* * * *

I really cannot understand it at all. These kind people tell me I have been very ill: that I must avoid any excitement, or I may bring about a relapse, yet they keep plying me with a ceaseless catalogue of queries, that seem awfully foolish to me. Not that I get excited at all about them, for they seem too stupid for anything.

They seem to think that I have been to some other world, Mars, I think they call it, and they want to know all about it. Did I find any inhabitants? What happened? How was the space-ship wrecked? And so on and so forth, but it's all Greek to me.

I rather like the bluff old Squire: he seems to welcome me almost like a son. And his sprightly daughter, Miss Lowell, she seems a nice girl, but sad, as though waiting for someone who's gone away: always waiting. She keeps asking me about "Ray," and when I think hard, and cannot remember, she seems so upset and the tears rise in her pretty eyes. I wish I could remember!

Another thing:—I went to the window the other day, and there was a large crowd outside. When the villagers saw me they took off their caps and threw them in the air, shouting and hurrahing in a way which caused me to drop the curtain, and recede quickly into the privacy of the background. Then Miss Lowell came in this morning and smilingly handed me a paper. She pointed to a paragraph headed "Knighthood for Knightlow?" and I read:—

"It is rumored that in all probability Stewart Knightlow, the intrepid explorer, and sole survivor of the ill-fated Ostwald Martian expedition, will be knighted by His Majesty, when he has fully recovered. It will be recalled that Mr. Knightlow was picked up, by a miraculous stroke of luck by Mr. Philips, the famous United States airman, who was making an attempt on the Round-the-World record, right in the heart of the Sahara desert, in the midst of a sandstorm. It is greatly to be regretted that Mr. Knightlow seems to have lost his memory completely, although it is hoped that this aberration will be only temporary. As we explained, however, in our earlier editions, there seems little hope that any other members of the party can have survived, as the planes of all civilized nations have scoured the desert incessantly since Mr. Knightlow's rescue, and the only result has been the discovery of fragments of the space-ship. It is assumed that Mr. Knightlow escaped

by using a parachute before the ship, for some reason, exploded, but if, as is hoped, the gallant gentleman recovers his memory, we may learn much. From the records of the expedition which Mr. Knightlow had about him, it appears clear that Mars is both uninhabited and uninhabitable but Dr. Dakin, the celebrated scientist who has made an examination of the specimens of soil found in Mr. Knightlow's satchel states that these contain considerable quantities of radium and similar substances, and the satchel has consequently been placed for safety in the vaults of the Bank of England."

"Very interesting," I said politely, "but my dear young lady, I don't for the life of me, see how this affects me."

A shade crossed her face. "I thought perhaps this would help you to remember. *You are Stewart Knightlow.*"

"Stewart Knightlow," I repeated the name. Yes, it did seem familiar someway, so did the mention of radium, but that was all. I tried hard to recall more, but the more I tried to recall, the more elusive seemed the facts. Miss Lowell sighed and brought me over a photograph of a man. He was a youngish chap in a rather loud check suit, and a perky air; and the portrait was signed "With love, Ray."

"Don't you remember Ray?" asked the girl.

"Never saw this chap in my life!" I said bluntly. She sighed again and put down the photograph sadly.

A Fabulous Treasure

SOMEHOW I felt sorry for her: she seemed to dote so on this young man. "Never mind," I said gently, "I'm sure to remember some day," and patted her shoulder tenderly.

Then the old squire came in and congratulated me boisterously. "You certainly deserve all the honors the Old Country can shower on you, my lad. Course, I always knew you had it in you. Bad job about the others, though! Still, the far flung battle-line an' all that you know! Martyrs in the name of progress! Ever thus, my boy: have a benedictine?"

And so on and so forth. It was all very embarrassing to me, particularly as I could not for the life of me remember a thing about my past life, or about the terrific adventures I was supposed to have taken part in. I was examined by the leading physicians and surgeons of the day: psycho-analysts had a go at me, but all to no purpose: as far as I was concerned, my life started when I awoke in the manor house with the charming Miss Lowell bending tenderly over me.

As time passed, I grew stronger in body and began to get about the countryside. Wherever I went admiring crowds would cheer. Even if I went to a neighboring town, somehow the citizens seem to have been apprised of my arrival, and I would find myself the cynosure of a delighted crowd. Children coming out of school would whoop with delight at the sight of me, and ragged urchins would nudge one another, and whisper in an awed voice, "That's 'im as 'as bin ter Mars an' back."

We were invited to functions, banquets and parties by the hundred, for the gentry soon found that I would not attend any of their entertainments without my host and hostess accompanying me. My photograph blazed forth from every shop window; I was the theme of a popular song; hats, drinks, soaps and matches were named after me; and even Mr. Tussaud called upon me for the purpose of securing my permission to display my effigy in his famous waxwork.

Then came the crowning glory, when His Majesty created me a baronet. The old-world pomp rather disconcerted me but the King himself put me at ease in a moment, with his tactful democratic manner, and complimented me with such sincerity on my achievements, that I felt mortally ashamed I could not remember anything about them. After that, the foreign powers vied with one another in bestowing their decorations while the municipalities showered the freedom of their cities upon me.

More interesting than all this ceremony, however, was the visit of Dr. Dakin with reference to the contents of my satchel. He informed me that inside the curious red clay balls he had found almost pure radium, which I gathered is an almost priceless substance. It is much sought after since it is invaluable for many purposes, particularly in therapeutics. Dr. Dakin informed me that he calculated there was more radium in the satchel than hitherto had been isolated in the whole world, he also stated that there were likely to be international complications as to the rights of ownership.

As the expedition was German, the German government had already been inquiring as to the satchel's content: it was more than likely, he thought, that an international commission would be convened to inquire into the whole matter, particularly as there was a world shortage of radio-active materials for prophylactic purposes.

On the other hand, advised the Doctor, there was also, in view of the fabulous value of the consignment, my own personal interest to be considered.

"After all," he said, "possession is nine points of the law, and you were certainly and indisputably in possession when you were rescued. Of course every nation has some rights in the matter of treasure trove, but I believe you have a good case for claiming the lot, in this particular instance, as no nation has any law governing what happens in another planet. I should advise you to engage counsel to look after your interests right away." I thanked the doctor for his advice, and the subject was dropped, as Mary, that is, Miss Lowell, entered to announce that dinner was being served.

When the doctor had taken his leave, I took my friends into my confidence, informing them of what Dr. Dakin had advised. The bluff old squire was a trifle contemptuous of the clay balls: he couldn't bring himself to believe that they were worth a million times their weight in gold: while as for engaging counsel, "Steer clear o' the law, my boy, whatever you do, else those wily lawyers will possess the satchel before you

can say Jack Robinson," he advised with brusque cynicism.

Miss Lowell saw in the contents of the satchel a fragrant romance. "I can see Ray and you, laboring hard, collecting this material, so that you might alleviate the sufferings of humanity on your return. Poor Ray," and she burst out weeping.

AS Dr. Dakin had prophesied, an International Commission was appointed to inquire into the disposal of the radium. Palatial quarters were taken in the Strand, and a battalion of counsel, a corps of solicitors, and a whole army of stenographers were engaged. Day after day, week after week, month after month the forensic battle raged, without any of the combatants flagging. Legal reputations were made by the score, but while lawyers wrangled, hundreds of poor devils were dying of cancer when they might have been saved by the use of the contents of the satchel.

The ownership of the satchel had become a *cause celebre* of the first magnitude. Contrary to the squire's advice, I had engaged counsel to look after my interests, and at length, fearing that the legal war would continue interminably, I had him draw up a document waiving my rights of ownership, on consideration that the whole of the radium was immediately distributed in equitable proportions throughout every institution capable of using it, in the interests of humanity throughout the whole world. All that I reserved for myself was a pension of £2,000 per year, to be contributed by all nations. When this document was presented, and its contents known to the public, it received the highest acclamation. My name was honored even more than before, but the Commission and its camp-followers were ill-pleased. Just when they had got warmed up to their work, and climatised to a soft life which gave every promise of continuing for years, to be told peremptorily to close down, and get out, was a bit thick.

"What," asked one famous K. C., "has this fellow Knightlow got to do with it, anyway?" and fresh legal quibbles were advanced with a view to continuing the struggle further.

But public opinion is always stronger than any faction and, in the end, the presidents and premiers of the nations met together for a private conclave, and the dilatory commission was ignominiously sacked. My terms were accepted in their entirety, with the solitary exception that it was unanimously agreed that the amount of my pension should be increased tenfold.

While all this excitement had been proceeding, the Squire and Miss Lowell had been my constant companions. As the weeks passed, the girl seemed to think less and less of the missing "Ray." She was a pretty girl, though her grief seemed to have aged her beyond her years. I was really sorry for her, and having conducted this big business of the radium, set out trying to distract her mind from unpleasant memories.

We went about everywhere together, while old Squire Lowell nodded approvingly. But what's the use of relating all this when you can guess for yourself. Before the next Christmas, I was head over heels in love with Mary Lowell and by the Spring Mary was Lady Knightlow. I could tell, though in her heart of hearts she still loved the cheeky looking youngster in the check suit.

CHAPTER V.

Tragedy Again!

NEVERTHELESS, I was the happiest man alive. We buried ourselves in the heart of the country, I playing the part of the old English Squire to the best of my ability, and Mary the role of Lady Bountiful to perfection. Here our son was born, and grew in stature and in mischief from year to year. At the age of eight, he was the madcap of the neighborhood, climbing trees, scaling crags and jumping hedges in a manner that was his mother's despair and my secret delight. As I looked at young Duncan, straight and supple as an arrow, I thought of him as Sir Duncan Knightlow, carrying on the tradition of the name, when his mother and I had long gone to our rest.

Of course, it must not be thought that I managed to evade publicity or the cares of business altogether. Company after company sought me out to act as director: many of them I never saw, but my fees were paid regularly by post. I was really interested however, in many branches of activity, among them being a colossal scheme for irrigating and rendering fertile a large tract of the Sahara. It seemed such a romantic project, that I had sunk most of my spare capital (not a huge sum as these things go) in the company and had even promised Mainwaring, the chairman, that I would take a trip to the site when operations began.

The mention of my name in connection with the new company had focussed public attention on the scheme, and the shares were all oversubscribed. This worried me a little for, after all, all such hazardous enterprises are a gamble, and it troubled me to think of people who could ill afford it losing their money.

That night I could not rest at all well: my fitful periods of slumber were haunted with strange horrible dreams of things I did not understand. I tossed from side to side, and lay for long periods awake. Towards morning I fell into a deep, more natural sleep, and was startled on awakening to find that it was nine o'clock. On coming down to breakfast, there was no sign of Mary, and on questioning the servants, I learned that she had arisen very early, hastily thrown on a coat and hat and gone out, apparently very agitated.

Puzzled but not really alarmed, I rang up Squire Lowell at the manor house. No, Mary had not arrived there: nor had he sent her any message. Well, perhaps one of her protéges in the hamlet was ill, I would go and see.

I scrambled into my ulster, grabbed my hat, and made for the door, but even as I did so, I saw coming up the motor drive a tragic little procession. A group of villagers carried the

limp form of a woman, whose clothing was dripping water at every step they took.

It was Mary. I hurried out and seized her in my arms, carried her to a settee, and laid her down. How quiet and still she looked, and what a fixed gaze of horror marred her features. The servants had phoned for medical aid and Venables, the butler, and I tried artificial respiration. Once I thought we were successful for Mary seemed to breathe, and opened her eyes and momentarily looked at me, only to look away with a horrified glance, as though I were some venomous reptile.

The doctors labored long and unsparingly, but it was not to be: my Mary had gone from me forever.

In the bleak days that followed only the thought of young Duncan bucked me up: had it not been for the boy, I should have sought forgetfulness in the river, too. There was an inquest, of course, but the inquiry revealed no reason why my dear wife should take her life. The servants testified to our mutual devotion, and to the sunny temperament of Lady Knightlow: only the night before they had noted that she was in a particularly happy frame of mind. To myself, the mystery was even more complete, for I knew that as the years had passed Mary had forgotten Ray Browne completely, and had grown really to love me.

Six empty months I spent in melancholy retrospection tending her grave, and seeking solace in solitude, the one bright ray in my darkened life being my love for my boy, who was growing daily more like his mother. My step had lost its springiness, my shoulders drooped: I existed rather than lived.

At the end of the six months, I was but a wraith of my former self. My doctors implored me to get away: a long sea voyage, an aerial trip, anything involving change; or, they hinted darkly, they would not be responsible for my sanity.

I WAS loath to leave, and yet I knew that in justice to my boy, I must keep a stiff upper lip, and make every effort to keep my mind in health. While I was cogitating, who should come along but Mainwaring, the chairman of the Sahara Irrigation Company. Opulent, corpulent and content, he was shocked by my haggard features and sorry frame, and in his masterful way, before I well knew what he was doing, he had arranged for Duncan and myself to accompany him on a long cruise in his yacht, ending with an inspection of the Sahara works.

To Duncan, whose taste in literature had reached the "pirate" stage, such a proposal was a glimpse of Heaven, and between the fat old company promoter, and my wheedling young imp, I hadn't a leg to stand on, nor a heart to refuse.

Even the hundred and one preparations for the trip served to restore my mental balance somewhat, and by the time we were sailing around the coast of Spain, I felt more my own self again. Duncan, I noted with extreme pleasure, was thriving immensely with the salt air and the tropic breeze. Tanned and fit, the young beggar seemed to have the energy of fifty folk. At Tunis we lay at anchor in the harbor, and bargained with hefty natives in bright costumes for native nick-nacks: at Cairo we stole ashore, and great was Duncan's delight to walk with me through the streets made famous in story and fable. It was in the upper reaches of the Nile that Duncan, the young scamp, learned how to climb the tall date palms with a wisp of rope, and how he delighted in the accomplishment.

In the meanwhile, Mainwaring had been interesting me mightily in his account of the work proceeding in the Sahara. A reasonably large tract of land had already been placed under cultivation, and very good results had been obtained. The idea was simple. A research worker had discovered that some miles below the surface of the desert, a large underground lake was indicated.

At first he had been laughed at for his pains, but Mainwaring had given the young investigator a hearing with the result that experimental borings justified the claims made. Actuated by internal osmotic pressure, the water had simply gushed out. It was then that Mainwaring conceived the idea of drilling several of these super-artesian wells, and irrigating hundreds of square miles of the desert by an elaborate sparging system, the poor soil of the desert being reinforced with tons of mineral fertilizers.

I had become so interested that I was simply itching to view this curious plant, and when we headed about, and made our way to Murzuk at the edge of the desert, I was nearly as enthusiastic an adventurer as Duncan.

But, could this be the awful desert of which we had heard so many harrowing tales? Surely not, for it was a veritable Eden of luscious fruit-trees, and graceful maize: tall sugar canes, and squat banana trees. The giant sparging pumps threw the water in the form of a mist all around, and as the droplets fell they sank into the earth, or collected in trenches that intersected one another as far as the eye could reach.

Mainwaring conducted us to his quarters which were wonderfully cool and comfortable, and tired out with our exertions we were soon sleeping peacefully.

A Honey Grove

EARLY next morning we were astir, and a fruit breakfast over, we were soon on a tour of inspection. One day followed another, and we lived the simple life in sheer enjoyment. Duncan had made friends with some of the overseers, and they were never tired of answering his endless questions, showing him all the novelties of the groves, or admiring his prowess in climbing the stately palms with the aid of a wisp of rope. Everyone seemed to love the boy and, after the first few days, I felt quite confident in letting him roam about at will, for I could not see how he could possibly come to any harm.

A new boring had lately been sunk to the

south of the present plantation, and the water was gushing up in millions of gallons and running largely to waste, for the sparging apparatus had not been completed in time. However, this had now been got ready, and day after day I watched the engineers grappling with the immense task they had set themselves. One day, while Mainwaring and I were poring over some blue-prints of a suggested improved sparging plant, Duncan came in quite excited.

"Say, Dad, what d'you think I've found? The funniest clump of trees all growing alone in the desert, just like a giant's grave, miles away from the plantation?"

"Miles, Duncan?"

"Well, perhaps not miles, but a quarter of a mile, at least."

"All right, I'll look at 'em sometime, Sonny. But run away and play: Mr. Mainwaring and I are busy just now." Duncan obeyed but I could see that he was full of his discovery.

I was more deeply interested in this scheme than anything I remember, and there seemed to me that several fundamental improvements might be introduced into the *modus operandi*, so for days I was closeted with Mainwaring figuring out plans, and dreaming constructional possibilities.

I had forgotten all about Duncan's discovery, but one day, he brought me a pot of viscid liquid, in a state of great excitement.

"Oh Dad! you know those trees I told you of? Well, I found this stuff on one of them today, and Paley says it's 'wild honey,' and there must be a real live wild bee-hive among the trees!"

I tasted the stuff: yes it was a kind of honey, but it had a peculiar flavor: somehow I had an idea that I had tasted it before, but rack my brains as I could, I couldn't for the life of me recall where.

"An' tomorrow, Dad," continued Duncan, "Paley and I are going to see if we can find that bee-hive."

"All right, my boy, but you'll have to watch you don't get stung!" I said lightly, for I didn't attach much importance to the incident. I had every confidence in Paley, the old caretaker, who loved the boy, as though Duncan had been his own child.

For some days Mainwaring and I had been planning to fly to the west coast, to have some new experiments made in the towns there. My first impulse was to take Duncan along with us, but the young madcap registered such strong disapproval, and seem so safe and happy where he was, that I left him in the keeping of old Paley.

We visited one after another of the mean towns of the coast, and the best part of our days was consumed ere we had done our work, and made our way back to the plantation.

It was getting rather late in the evening, but it was funny Duncan wasn't waiting for us: and what was the matter with everybody, the servants were shuffing along in deep dejection? "Hullo Paley," I shouted to the old caretaker as I saw him hastening along, "Where's the boy?"

The old servant hung his head. Then he fell at my feet moaning. "He's gone, Sir Stewart, disappeared completely. We've searched the plantation, we've searched the desert, but we cannot find a trace of the boy."

I shook the old man in a frenzy. "And I left my boy, my all, in your care, you—."

"Don't reproach me, Sir, I would willingly die, if I could bring him back."

"Bring him back? Then you think he is *dead?*"

"I, I—don't know. We've beaten the plantation for days, and the surrounding deserts, but we can't find a trace of him. We were going, he and I, in quest of the wild bees, and I found I had some jobs to do I had overlooked. When I came for him, he'd vanished. I thought he had gone to the tree, but we have searched all round it and cannot find anything but his footsteps. Of course, he had been there several times before."

The night had come on, sudden and black, but with torchlights we combed the plantation and the surrounding desert yelling and shouting as we went. But it seemed as if the earth had swallowed up my boy.

AS the day broke, we halted, weary and dispirited. Two hundred yards away, the clump of curious vegetation Duncan had discovered stood like an ugly blot. I left the others resting, and approached it, not with any thought of hope in my heart, but just, I suppose, because I was curious to see what had so interested my poor boy.

It was certainly a very strange collection. I never remembered seeing any of the plants before, even in a botanical garden, of such a strange aspect were they. Yet at the back of my mind, I had a strange feeling of familiarity with them, for which I could not account. The clump seemed sinister: "like a giant's grave," I thought of Duncan's quaint fancy.

Tough leathery creepers wound round stubby exotic ferns, and in the centre a huge growth dominating the rest towered twenty feet or more in the air. Its thick stem reminded me of the body of a python, as it rose with a squirming curve in the air, terminating in two huge leaves, like elephant ears, that seemed to be fused together. Down the stem I noticed a thick fluid gently flowing.

"Ugh, so this was Duncan's honey tree! It is eerie, true, but how could it possibly be connected with his disappearance?" Then my eye lit on something which caused me to shiver with cold apprehension. It was the short section of rope which Duncan used in his tree-climbing performances, and it was lying at the foot of the hideous growth, as though he had dropped it. And as I looked I saw on the slippery trunk, the marks of my boy's heels as he had climbed the stem, holding the short piece of rope around it, evidently searching for the source of the honey. My eyes followed the vague footprints until I beheld the fused leaves and there, oh horror, dangling through the juncture of the leaves, was Duncan's watch held by its chain.

Then, and then only came back my memory like an overwhelming flash.

(Continued on Page 261)

The Hour the Conqueror Came

by **Edsel Newton**

(Illustration by Hawkins)

Over the scream of the motors we heard the shrieks and screams, but they were of despair. The wobbling mass of stuff was conquering and obliterating the city below.

I WAS boarding the *Golondrina* of the International Lines.

She was the latest thing in transoceanic airplanes. From the end of her nose to the tip of her rudder she was built for speed. Her ten great motors of a thousand horsepower reflected each shining part under the glare of the sunlight. Her transparent wing, three hundred feet long, reached out as a challenge to the sky that she had conquered, the upper strata where she had broken all passenger records. In 1942 there were few records to be broken.

* * *

I boarded her at the Grand Central Terminal at Los Angeles fifteen minutes before she lifted off for Valparaiso, Chile. Two hours before that time when I had turned from the police station into the office of the *Daily Bulletin* where I was a reporter, I was suddenly conscious of the fact that all eyes were turned my way. That much I remembered as I entered the editorial room. Spencer, the city editor, was on his feet, suddenly, smiling as if elated at my arrival. The staff had followed him to surround me, firing questions faster than I could answer them.

"You knew Creel, didn't you?"

"You're a helluva reporter to hide a story like that!"

"Shut up!" bawled Spencer. "I've got to have all the facts about Holden's murder. Now out with it, Edwards!"

I recall having taken Spencer to the little conference room outside the realm of the editorial staff. Here I was forced by that self-possessed worthy to disclose what I knew of the murder of young Dale Holden whom, six months before, I had found dead in his chemical laboratory. For purely personal reasons I had kept what I knew as a secret, and consequently had lost my big chance of becoming star reporter on the *Bulletin*.

It had been in the fall of 1941—the fifteenth of September to be exact—that Dale Holden discovered that strange chemical formula now known to the world as "multiple". Years of research and hard work were back of the discovery of this strange substance whose elements, when united with another, caused the resulting creation to grow at a rate faster than the eye could see—a spongy, jelly-like growth that filled test cylinders almost before the young chemist could seal them.

Holden had called me in to view his triumph, the advantages of which I could readily understand. A few drops of the strange stuff placed in a large room would grow until the room was filled! It could be used as a terrible agent of war!

I told Holden that I was going to make this the biggest story of the year. Smiling he asked me to wait until that afternoon when he could have Diane there—Diane who was his fiancée, who had hung around the shop until she became a fixture. That she had inspired him to finish his work I knew. I believe every tenth word of Dale's was in reference to Diane Nordham.

I suggested calling at the Nordham home on my return from luncheon and bringing Diane to the laboratory where I was to take some pictures of the two. Dale consented to this and I hurried through the noonday meal with visions of a banner line story. It was that decision of Holden to have Diane there that is the excuse for this story.

I drove to the Nordham mansion out in Beverly where Diane greeted me, in that sisterly way of her's and together we returned to Holden's laboratory. I opened the door and gently pushed Diane into the room ahead of me. But she stepped back with a terrifying scream that rent the air and brought dozens of people to the door. I looked inside. Dale lay upon the floor, face upward, with a small test tube in his mouth, held there securely with ordinary friction tape. When I reached his side I knew he was dead.

EDSEL NEWTON

THERE are many ways to kill a cat—and many ways for one to gain his end in this world of modern science. The recent mysterious death-dealing fogs that swept over Belgium, France and England will probably turn out to be only queer manifestations of natural forces—yet they could just as well have been caused by human agencies. Where people live closely together it becomes all to easy for some anti-social forces to spread death and destruction.

"Multiple" is something new in the category of chemistry; yet there is nothing about it that may not prove possible. If a chemical substance were invented that could absorb oxygen into itself, it could become almost like a miraculously growing organism—it could divide and subdivide and increase its dimensions enormously. This substance then could become a great menace to any locality in which it was placed. Mr. Newton gives us, as usual, one of his human and exciting stories of a scientific wonder.

MY first thought was for Diane. I sent her home in a taxi and then I telephoned the police. While they were on their way, I took a chance on removing the test tube from Dale's lips. It was then I discovered that "multiple" had not been the cause of his death, for the tube had been filled with a strange acid.

A strange horror filled me—not at the realization of death alone, but a possible murder. Cold sweat stood out all over me. I wanted to run, to get as far away from the scene as possible. But I took the tube, wrapped it in tissue, and placed it in my pocket. Then I looked about the room.

Upon first glance I saw nothing unusual. All the instruments and apparatus were left as they had been two hours before when Dale had told me of his victory. The rear door was still locked securely, the anteroom and office had not been disturbed. I glanced at the cylinders—

Where two hours before they had been filled with that strange substance, now they held only a colorless liquid!

I removed the seal from one of them and smelled the contents. It was the same acid-smell that came from the test tube between Dale's lips! It began to grow. I closed the lid. The absence of oxygen had returned the spongy growth into its original elements.

A police ambulance always hurries the body of a dead man away from the scene of his death. I was so upset that I could not have written the story at the time, even though I was the only reporter in the city who knew the truth about the chemicals. That Dale had been murdered I was not sure, although suicide was hardly within reason. I wrote the story tersely as a "mystery death" and left it for the police until I could see Dale's father and find if anything had suddenly transpired that could have caused Dale to end his life.

The old man was pretty badly shaken by the news. I told him as quickly as possible how I had found his son in the laboratory, my experience with "multiple", and of Diane having gone there with me to make pictures of herself and Dale for the *Bulletin*.

Mr. Holden was speechless for several minutes. When he did regain his voice he spoke between sobs and his houlders shook convulsively.

"It's the woman—Diane Nordham," he said. "After all these years of waiting to see my son successful she has killed him."

"Why, that can't be!" I almost shouted. "Diane loved Dale. She meant everything to him."

"Everything," he agreed," but Creel—Creel—" his voice stopped suddenly. His body went limp. He collapsed before I could reach him.

I tried to bring him around with cold applications, but it was useless. He lay cold and lifeless and by the time the police ambulance came I knew there would be two inquests held the next morning.

I'll never forget Diane, stunned and horrified, as she told the coroner's jury of how we found Dale's body in the laboratory. None of us knew any possible reason for murder, save a far-fetched clue that lingered on my own mind. So the jury rendered a verdict of suicide, and suspicious eyes were turned upon Diane.

On the Trail of "Multiple"

I TOOK her home and left her, wondering why the jury had been so ready to turn accusing ing fingers upon Diane. As she was in no condition to talk, I went back to the office of the *Bulletin* and wrote a half column about the findings of the coroner's jury and covered the past few years during which Dale had made so many experiments. Though I had seen this man Creel only once, I could hardly connect him with Dale's death. I never knew his business, nor his nationality. He was a man of the world and a good mixer, often included, so I heard, in Diane's parties.

Two days later I called at the Nordham home to find Diane looking much better and ready to receive me. It was then that I brought up the subject of Creel's entry into Beverly society, not implying of course that he might have had something to do with the death of young Holden. Diane had met him on a plane coming up from Tokyo.

I continued to refer to him throughout our conversation, wondering if my hints would lead Diane to connect him with Dale's death. At last she caught my meaning. She sat there in her chair as if frozen for several minutes. Then she told me calmly.

"I remember he was always curious about Dale's experiments. I think that is how we met—when I told the pilot-captain of the *Oceanics* of his idea for 'multiple'. I suppose I was a blabbing fool. Creel and I were introduced an hour later, and during the remainder of the flight he kept at my side, always talking science. When we landed the next morning he insisted on coming to see us. He came, and I introduced him to Dale.

"Dale wasn't friendly with him, but Creel didn't seem to resent it. He was here that morning when Dale telephoned and told me of his success. In my excitement I must have said something to Creel. He left an hour before you came. None of us have seen him since."

That was all Diane knew.

I found Creel's former address and tried to compare the fingerprints on the test tube with those on the furniture about the room. But as it was a hotel room and had been occupied again, my efforts were useless.

I went to the city chemist who had analysed the liquid substance found in Dale's lungs. It was not "multiple", or it would have grown again. I had decided the day before that the stuff which killed the young chemist had either been decomposed or deprived of its growing properties.

Here was a big story, but I was powerless to "break" it to the world. Diane's only living relative was her mother, old and delicate. To have brought her daughter into this terrible mess would have killed the dear old lady.

Disliking "dead" reporters as I do, I was powerless. As far as I was concerned the incident

was closed. I told Diane as much, and gratefully she agreed with me.

During the ensuing weeks I saw her often at her home where she remained unhappy and miserable, but bearing up because of her mother. Then ten days before Spencer called me into the office and demanded all the facts, Mrs. Nordham died.

I had been to the funeral and had called to see Diane several times during the next five days. On the sixth she had disappeared.

SPENCER told me the rest of the story a few minute before he ordered me to board the big new plane for Valpardiso. He had a wireless from Diane in his hand, and I read it:

REPORTER EDWARDS FREE TO TELL ENTIRE STORY STOP HAVE LOCATED CREEL WHO KILLED DALE HOLDEN

"Why didn't you send the message to me?" I demanded.

Spencer stamped a cigaret into the floor.

"I figured she knew something more than had been disclosed. Upon the death of her mother I sent one of the boys out to interview her. He got nothing. She would talk to no one but you, and you were chasing down that story about a conquest of the world by the Black Legion. Before you returned she left for Valparaiso. I can't understand why she went so far away before coming through with the story. I answered her radiogram this morning."

"Perhaps she wasn't sure of herself," I suggested. "It's all a mystery to me."

Spencer scoffed. "Mystery, Hell! Creel stole that formula! No one has been able to tell what came of it."

"No one knew," I answered. "Even you did not know of it until this minute. The laboratory has been locked since his death, and I buried those cylinders which were filled with 'multiple.'"

"Why?" he demanded hotly.

"The stuff's dangerous," I replied. "No one knows what would come of it if some greenhorn broke the seal. It might grow to enormous proportions—fill the entire city."

"Holy cats!" he gasped.

"I acted upon an impulse," I nodded, "but it was the only thing I could do. Now that I am free to talk I'll give you the cylinders and—"

"Just tell me where they are and I'll send for them and protect them. You're off for Valparaiso on the next plane— You have thirty minutes to get ready." He pushed the latest edition of the *Bulletin* into my hands. "Read this on your way to Chile."

* * *

Thus I found myself aboard the new liner at the Grand Central Terminal dressed in a one-piece linen suit, unshaven and hungry, with only a portable electro-typewriter to keep me company in the cabin which had been hurriedly reserved for me. I sought the seclusion of the cabin to think over the situation, and the more it turned over in my mind the more convinced was I was Creel had stolen the formula for the making of "multiple".

Anyone might have stolen it, but this man had killed Dale Holden in order to gain possession of it. Dale's father had been ready to disclose facts which might have jailed Creel, but he had died with the story on his lips. And now, in far away Chile, Diane was on the trail of the mystery.

The big airliner, the latest thing in transoceanic planes, lifted from the airport and pointed her nose to the southeast. I looked through the porthole down upon the city, already ten thousand feet below. We were off for Valparaiso, two hundred miles per hour, with a possible tail wind pushing us onward across the western side of Mexico and into the tropics.

CHAPTER II

Vandalism

DURING the three hours that passed before dusk fell upon the earth below and an enveloping haze became our path through the sky, I remained in the cabin reading an account of how the crew of a small yacht had been driven ashore in Valparaiso harbor by a strange spongy growth which had stopped only when it had begun to roll over the side of the tiny vessel.

It was an "A.P." story, well written and to the point; but, because the writer had been unfamiliar with chemistry, he had not brought that element into the possible solution of the mystery. Instead he had concluded that the growth was of a strange marine phenomenon. It had been left for Spencer to connect the story with my own—half an hour before I boarded the plane.

I took a turn through the saloon, before ordering dinner, and looked over the passengers. They were a mixed lot—English, Spanish and French; the population of the world has now become so mixed that the most patriotic citizen of one land may spend his life in another, which is possible only because war has been outlawed. The people of different nationalities constitute "orders" so to speak. That is to say the French are clannish among themselves, as are the English and the Nordics, although assimilation is quickly blending them into one magnificent race.

Having so much to think about, I went back to my cabin and sat in the wicker chair by the port hole, my eyes fixed on the tips of the great wings as they cut through the slight mist fifteen thousand feet up.

The motors and the wind gave forth a weird scream not unlike the siren of a police patrol. Together with the fantastic array of clouds below us, this was an experience of which no one could tire. It was ecstatic, thrilling, to be a part of the great things which had come—the radio-vision motion pictures now showing in the saloon, the telephone at my side which would connect me with any point in the world, infallible compressed-gas motors on the wings of this great mogul of the air which bore us on to Valparaiso without a stop.

All these wonderful steps to an ideal civilization had come only through the creative efforts of man as opposed to the destructive. The intelligence which built these machines and discovered the laws governing their use, the timely

grasp of the great principles to daily life, had wrought this new era, this civilization which was so secure that it could not die. War only a horrid thought—efficiency the watchword of the people—Self-conquest the creed of the learned. Life indeed was wonderful!

* * *

I was about to doze as I sat there in the cool draught from the port hole when I suddenly thought of the telephone. I decided that it would be proper to get into communication with Diane and arrange for a meeting as soon as I landed. The operator-navigator connected me with Valparaiso, and then the hotel where Diane was staying. Then minutes after I called she was telling me of her reason for going to Chile.

"I learned through a small package which I received in the mail that he was here," she explained. "It contained a small bottle which I opened in the bathroom at my home. The bottle was filled with 'multiple'. I threw it into the bath tub. It began to grow. I swept it into the outlet and it filled the pipe, stopping it up. Then I covered it with water which stopped the oxygen supply, and I suppose it's still there. I had to hurry here—I'm the only one who really knows Creel. But I'm glad you're on your way. I'll meet you at the airport at Viña Del Mar. You may—"

That was the end of our conversation. It ended with an abrupt click. I knew not why. Frantic, I called the operator aboard the plane and he tried to renew the connection, but to no avail. He came to the cabin greatly annoyed; he could not explain his failure to make the connection. He had inspected the entire apparatus and found it in perfect order. I suggested the aerial.

"It's a counterpoise aerial—on top of the cabin," he explained. "It is secured by several connections. Nothing could happen to it, surely."

"Suppose we take a look," I said significantly.

He nodded and I followed him out through the control room, past the silent pilot-mate who had a contemplative eye on his instruments before him. We climbed the ladder and up behind the wind deflector on top. One glance told us what had happened—the aerial had been cut away in its entirety!

THE operator was as shocked as I.

"Vandalism!" he shouted over the scream of the wind and motors.

Discussion could not help the situation. We hurried down the ladder into the control room. I asked the pilot-mate if any one had passed through and gone up the ladder, the only way of reaching the top side from the saloon. He shook his head, too busy to talk, and continued with his task of setting the stabilizer down. The operator motioned me away, and I followed him down into the saloon where pilot-captain Benton and several passengers were wondering at the abrupt cessation of the radio-vision motion picture.

"The aerial we use for the instruments is inside the fuselage," the operator explained. "If I made your connection through it we would disturb the pilot."

"The connection isn't so important," I said. "You want to know why the aerial disappeared."

The pleasant pilot-captain followed us into the operator's room where we told him of what had happened. Needless to say he was much disturbed. He asked us not to mention the incident to the passengers, and he started investigating. But nothing came of his two-hour search of the great plane.

The captain then ordered all passengers to their respective cabins. Then he sat down before me and started asking question about my conversation with Diane. I told him the entire story, much as I hated to. He was more disturbed than ever, and we talked of the possibilities until early in the morning hours, when I finally sought my berth.

I do not know how long I slept. In spite of all that had happened I dozed off under the lullaby of the screaming wind and motors, unthinking of safety—my own and that of my two hundred fellow passengers.

I remember having left the port hole open, much because we would soon pass through the hot tropical current even though at our altitude.

I was suddenly awakened by the crash of glass against the door of the cabin, opposite the port hole. I switched on the light even before I was fully awake and looked about me. The sight that met my eyes sent terror to my soul, left me cold and lifeless. A thin-glass vial of liquid had been thrown through the port. It had burst against the door and the spongy growth of "multiple" was already filling the room!

It grew from the tiny splash to a puddle the size of my head even while I looked on. I sprang from my berth toward the door, first closing the port above me, not realizing that I possessed the power to move thus. The opening of the door swept the stuff farther into the cabin. I hurried outside and closed the door, stuffing the vent at the bottom with my bathrobe, and stood there waiting for whatever might happen, clad only in pajamas and trembling in the realization of what I had escaped.

Pilot-captain Benton came along and stood watching me as I finished the work of making the room air tight. I tried to tell him as quickly as possible just what had happened. Only with much persuasion did I prevent his entry into the room.

"The stuff's poison!" I insisted. "It will fill the entire ship if it is once released from that air-tight room. An outside agency put in there—to kill me."

"I'm afraid you're the jinx!" he exclaimed, "But there's no time to talk. What can be done?"

"Lack of air will decompose 'multiple'," I explained. "When we reach Valparaiso you'll have to submerge half of this ship in water and clean out that room."

The captain was angry beyond words. He called the navigator-operator in and snapped an order. "You two men stand watch over that door. Soak that bathrobe that you stuffed into

the vent with water. I'm going to sleep. If anything happens call me."

Diane

WE stood watch over that door throughout the morning hours, with never a word uttered between us, the operator regarding me with suspicion; myself confused and nervous.

I tried to account for the bottle of "multiple". I knew with a certainty that it was designed to end my life. Whoever threw it must have landed on the top of the liner, reached down and tossed it in, and made his get-away without being seen. I could picture myself being smothered by that spongy substance, eaten by its acids—destroyed in silence! That I was among the first to know this terror that struck in the night was doubly interesting, from the standpoint of a newspaperman.

I held the key to the mystery, perhaps, and consequently was the original target of whoever had stolen the formula. I was again suddenly startled by a though that flashed into my mind. What of Diane—had she too met with this terrible danger? Had she overcome it—was she secure?

Strangely I was doubly terrified by the thought. It would be ten hours before we reached Valparaiso—somewhere between sundown and darkness. Until then we could not establish communication. The ethics of the air prevented any suggestion to the pilot-captain that we make a landing at some port on the way. I was helpless—I had only a pair of pajamas to wear until the captain brought me an extra one-piece linen suit.

Nothing was said to the passengers who came into the saloon as the sun came up and the fog lifted from the coast below us. My eyes were constantly upon the door. Once or twice when the passengers were sufficiently distracted from the after end of the plane I re-soaked the bathrobe which I had stuffed into the vent. I knew the air-tight port had taken care of the other side. My only objective was Valparaiso. Nothing else mattered.

All that day, as we shot like a meteor through the upper air, the captain, the mate and the third pilot-mate remained awake to discuss the situation. The second pilot-mate was at the controls, the motors full out, the ship screaming off the two hundred and forty miles per hour until the noise became a monotonous din, instead of a fascinating experience.

Four o'clock found us at Antofagasta, five-fifteen looking down upon Huasco. A short time later we saw the tower near the end of Avenida, Brazil, and then the busy harbor of Valparaiso, with Viña Del Mar airport just below us.

THE pilot put the great mogul on her ear and brought her around into the wind. Quickly he sat us down there on the water, gave the motors the gas full out, and pulled us upon the beach. Passengers clambered out, some tired and weary of the long flight, others elated at reaching this strange land.

I was in a hurry to land and find Diane, but first I had to thank Captain Benton for the loan of the suit and to do what I could to help him obliterate the "multiple" in that cabin. He did not detain me.

"When you have found your party you may return here," he said. "I think we had better stick together—we may need each other! In the meantime I shall remove that stuff from the cabin with a suction hose."

I thanked him and hurried away. A taxi cab took me to the customs house and on to the Divilla, a little hotel perched high up near the old prison. I ran up the steps and into the lobby in breathless excitement. Diane was seated there calmly, half-smiling at my excitement.

"Something cut us off last night, Don, and the owners of that new plane have been frantic."

"If they had *only* cut us off!" I said. Whereupon I told her the story.

She listened in silence until I had finished.

"But how did this agency know of your presence on that ship?" she demanded.

I was stumped. I told her of the cabin being filled with "multiple" and how I had escaped.

"They may have learned that you were board through the telegraphic passenger list. I knew you were coming thirty minutes before you went aboard the plane at the terminal."

"Creel has something to do with this!" I said. "He is the only possible man on earth who could connect me with a search for the murderer of Dale Holden and the thief of that formula. I met him only twice—once at your home and once in the laboratory where he was questioning Dale about the possibilities of 'multiple'."

"I'm sorry I ever met him," she confessed. "Of course one doesn't think of such a distinguished man as a potential murderer, though."

"You can't be blamed for it, Diane," I assured her. Then I told her of my plans to visit the plane again that evening.

"I'm going with you," she said at once. "On the way, I'll tell you what I learned."

We settled in the cab. "As I told you," she began. "I received a package from here via air mail. I compared the handwriting with Creel's, and then I knew the truth. He had murdered Dale to get possession of that formula. How or why he did it I don't know. One would suppose he overpowered Dale and placed that bottle—"

She broke off shortly and was silent a minute before going on.

"I boarded the first plane for Valparaiso—incognito. Arriving here I went to the hotel and called in the national police. I gave them my version of the story and Creel's description. They found him in an office on Avenida Brazil, ostensibly operating an airline communication bureau. I think it is known as the Internacional Comunicacion Compañia, or some name of that kind. I can point it out on our way to the plane. Anyway, two days ago a small yacht which is known to be a laboratory was anchored in the harbor, with one of Creel's henchmen as captain. You probably read the story—"

"I did—go on," I said, anxiously.

"Something happened aboard. They lost con-

trol of a quantity of 'multiple' and were driven from the yacht. The men swam ashore, and the stuff filled the boat and sank it—grew up onto the decks and became a huge mass of that spongy substance. It overflowed into the water, hiding the boat from view. Then the entire mass sank upon the water. Only a fire boat saved the harbor. By the time the police had connected Creel with the yacht the latter disappeared. He used one of those tiny *Spitzbern—Bullet* planes to make his get-away, carrying a man with him."

"Then he flew out and met us and tried to kill me," I said. "Why?"

"Why?" she demanded, "Why to be rid of you, of course!"

"But common sense, Diane. What can he do by such attacks?" I objected.

"I'm stumped," Diane shook her head. "One can catch a criminal easier when he knows the motive back of the crime."

CHAPTER III.

Creel in Command

WE were at the airport—the combination land and sea port of Viña Del Mar. The plane was out in the harbor, silent, unanchored, as far as I could see. We went to it in a small boat.

As we neared her I could see that she was drifting, but I supposed she was well in the hands of Captain Benton and his crew. We slid up to the starboard door and climbed into the saloon. The owner of the boat moved quickly away. We started toward the captain's room, forward in the great plane. Before we had taken ten steps, two men rushed from a cabin on our right and stood before us, automatics in hand.

A low wail escaped Diane's lips. My own heart stood still.

"Get into that cabin—quick!" snapped one of them. He indicated the one from which they came. We went inside. Then we saw their purpose. The entire crew, including Captain Benton, were lined up against the wall and Creel, coldly calculating the situation, stood at the wall opposite.

One could not have placed himself in our immediate circumstances and fathomed Creel's purpose. One could guess, but man wastes too much time in guessing. So far as I could see, his purpose at the moment was to obtain possession of the *Golondrina*, the largest and finest high-altitude plane in the service of the great International Airlines.

"You may line up with the others, Edwards—the lady can remain here with us," he said.

"What's your game?" I demanded.

"Reporters should listen—and never talk," he shot back at me. "Anyway, Edwards, in my hands you are helpless to molest me. So far you have constituted my greatest fear, but I suppose you kept quiet for Miss Nordham's sake."

"He did," said Diane.

Creel sat down in a wicker chair and studied us. I could see now that he was the cold gambler type, desperate and dangerous. Dressed in his one-piece suit of velvet with silver buckles and patent shoes he was a picturesque character.

"Well, none of you are in danger—at least as long as you obey orders. I have only four lieutenants. In a conquest of the world one cannot trust too many."

"Are you entering upon a conquest of the world?" asked Captain Benton, speaking for the first time since Diane and I entered the room.

Creel sighed. "Only of certain cities, my good man," he said slowly. He glanced at his two men in the doorway. "One of you hurry over to the dock and tell the others to bring that boat load of 'multiple' along." The man hurried away.

"The thing for which you killed Dale Holden!" said Diane furiously.

"The one sin of my life," he answered coldly. "You are not to mention that again—never!"

I turned to Captain Benton and by way of apology said, "I'm afraid I've pulled you into a terrible situation."

Creel overheard. "For the sake of morale I'd better say that we would have taken this ship if you'd never been in existence, Edwards. That goes for all of you. We wanted the ship. We have it. Nice of you, Captain, to have filled the tanks with bluegas before taking to the water again."

"You're not at all welcome to the favor," said Benton bitterly.

"But I suppose I can induce you to navigate the *Golondrina* for me?" he asked.

"Hardly," Benton snapped.

"Not even under pain of being thrown into a stateroom with a half-pint of multiple for company?" asked Creel.

"What's your purpose—I have a right to know that much," returned the captain, unwavered by the threat.

At that moment a boat slumped against the side of the plane. Creel looked through a port hole, and then turned to the captain.

"We'll discuss that later. My men are coming aboard with ten cylinders of 'multiple'—two hundred gallons!"

WE stood there for several minutes while Creel went outside and joined his men, leaving a single guard at the door.

There were six of us held prisoners—Captain Benton, his two pilot-mates and the third mate, myself and Diane.

"Where's the radio-navigator?" I asked of the captain.

"I sent him ashort to make a report to our agent here—the aerial and that stuff in your cabin last night," Benton whispered.

"Just what I wish to do—that'll warn the government air service of Chile to run us down."

Already a turn to extricate ourselves from Creel's hands! But I wasn't satisfied with that. We were all uncomfortable.

I'll never forget the next half hour as we stood there looking into each other's faces, all wondering what would become of us. Diane was silent and gloomy and, as I looked at her, fine and young and beautiful, I was determined that

Creel should not last long. Ten minutes later it seemed my vows were in vain.

Creel's men finished loading the cylinders of "multiple" into the plane. They stowed it aft in the tall compartment. The four of them came forward and gathered about the door.

"We're lifting off right away," Creel announced. "We are forced to hurry because of suspicious characters who are watching us from shore."

"I and my men shall remain with the ship," said Benton firmly.

"In that case you shall help navigate the plane," said Creel. "How about you, Edwards?"

"Send Miss Nordham ashore, and I'll remain," I answered.

Creel laughed.

"You may speak for yourself, Diane," he said, "but it will be dangerous—in Valparaiso. The city will be smothered tonight—everyone there will die—except our friends who have been warned. Thus it will be for all the cities of the world."

No one could imagine the horror that filled us at that moment, of the stark realization that we were not only in the hands of a cold blooded thief but a murderer of thousands. I think we were all stunned beyond words. I recall having crossed the room and held Diane close to me as she reeled from the shock. Then the door was being closed. We were left alone, locked in, to think of the horrible thing which must happen, perhaps within the next hour.

Perhaps I can make it more vivid to you by recording my own thoughts of the next few minutes.

Here, for the first time, I knew the purpose of this man Creel. It must be that he belonged to the Black Legion, an organization which had slowly grown to become world-wide. It wanted to possess the world. If it destroyed cities, those who fled could not return to take possession of them.

Thus the use of "multiple". Perhaps that which he had in the plane at that moment would doom a million innocent people. If he had the formula for a nullifier he could recover those cities for the Legion within a few hours. It was a horrible thought. It was beyond the understanding of all the scientists whom I knew. None save Dale Holden could have concocted the formula for "multiple". The dear fellow would turn in his grave if he could know of the horrible use to which it was being put by Creel who had murdered him.

I THOUGHT of the radio-navigator as a possible savior of the situation. I hoped and prayed that something would happen before that great plane shot across the water and lifted into the air to become a menace to the world. But there was no hope. Men who could board an airplane going at a speed of over two hundred miles per hour and leave it again without being seen were not to be considered lightly. They had probably taken care of the radio-navigator. I believed we were lost. I could never trust Creel to have enough mercy to spare the few lives aboard the *Golondrina*.

The men were in the control room now, starting the motors. They were quickly familiarizing themselves with the plane before taking off. The mere turn of a switch started a modern motor. A child could operate them. But it required skill to handle the *Golondrina*.

Apparently one of the men possessed enough experience with the controls of a large plane to operate this one, for no sooner had the motors attained the appropriate speed than the *Golondrina* taxied across the water. Faster and faster she went, gathering speed toward the open sea. Then we felt our weight against the deck. She had cleared the waves and was climbing higher and higher as night came upon us.

Locked in that cabin, we could only wait. There was no use for speech, no comfort in speculation. We knew not what was going on inside the saloon.

The *Golondrina* sped out to sea until she gained altitude, and then circled back toward Valparaiso. She went on slowly, as if feeling her way. We looked through the open port hole to see the lights of the city spread out there on the side of the hills, a city of happy Latin people who would soon die.

The plane flew onward toward Viña Del Mar again. We then saw long lines of people marching into the country. These were the Legionnaires—the people who had been warned, who would return as soon as the others had been killed and the great heap of "multiple" nullified. Stragglers were in the rear, hurrying to overtake the first procession.

SEVERAL times the ship circled the city, each time losing altitude, until she crept almost noiseless within a distance of a few hundred feet of the streets, avoiding the hillside by a short distance. At last, when there were no more stragglers marching from the outskirts of the city, I saw a phosphorescent stream of liquid fall from our wing compartment and into the city below. Creel had taken the stuff forward and placed it where he could easily drop it into the streets.

Again and again, as the great plane hovered over Valparaiso, streams of "multiple" were sent forth, until at last I saw seething masses of it taking shape in the streets. Then Creel tried another method. He dropped gallon after gallon of the chemical onto the side of the mountain where it grew to become an enormous heap of destruction and roll down into the city and fill the streets. This continued before our horrified faces until we could see nothing but a huge mountain of that spongy growth, with hardly a building standing above it.

Over the scream of the motors we heard shrieks and screams, but they were only of despair. Nothing could now save Valparaiso.

The wobbling mass of stuff was conquering and obliterating the city below.

The plane was standing out to sea again. She hovered near the water several miles out, came

around into the northern breeze, and settled down in silence.

Diane had fainted in my arms. Captain Benton and his men were tragically still, staring into each other's faces, helpless to stop this wholesale murder of good people. As I revived Diane and sat down in the wicker chair to hold her in comfort, she sobbed like a child until she became hysterical and difficult to handle.

Over the lapping of the waves against the side of the plane I heard Creel and his men talking.

"I suppose our prisoners will have a change of heart now," said Creel. "I've worked on that formula long enough to know what it can do. Two hundred gallons covered Valparaiso. After eight hours it loses its properties and vaporizes into the air. Nothing like it!"

Then the five cut throats sang their verses of rebellion and destruction and triumph for their allies who would return to take full possession of Valparaiso at dawn.

CHAPTER IV

THE six of us in the cabin waited and wondered. Captain Benton and his men were silent for the most part of the time, although now and then one of them would speculate upon the possibilities of "multiple," and why Creel had used it.

"Why not gas?" asked the second pilot-mate. "Ordinary poison gas would answer the same purpose." I tried to explain.

"But the people—everywhere—have gas masks since that dreadful invasion of the western hemisphere by the first wave of the Legion who came two years ago. Look at Philadelphia with its ten thousand dead within a few minutes—and part of them Legionnaires. No, by this way no one can escape, not because of the comparatively negligible acidic properties, but because 'multiple' smothers them and doesn't give them a chance to get away."

"How horrible!" said Diane, her voice weak and far away. Her eyes were wide and staring. It was pitiful to see her as she sat there in the chair. But she was fighting the battle of her sanity against the terror that had come to her.

We waited for thirty minutes more, while the ship drifted slowly inshore, Creel and his men noiseless. Captain Benton became restless.

"At least this party could have been given a few comforts. We shouldn't all be compelled to remain in one cabin, nor to have Miss Nordham suffer like this."

"I'm not suffering," Diane assured him. "Really, if there wasn't so much murder I'd think it was a wonderful adventure. But to see all those people running in the streets and to hear their cries—"

"Don't, Diane, be quiet!" I said. "You musn't think of that. Try to sleep."

Her nerves were worn to a frazzle, I could see. She relaxed though, and as darkness came upon us again, we sat down on the deck in silence and waited.

The awful picture of Valparaiso came back to me with all its horror and death. I could still see that great mass of strange and terrible and malignant chemical that grew, rolling down from the mountain upon the city, the people running for life, knowing not what they faced, save death. The great tower off Avenida Brazil; the statue of Arturo Pratt, the great admiral of Chile; the public buildings and hotels—all covered with that mass until every living person had been smothered to death, with a comparative handful of the Black Legion waiting outside until their agent had finished the vile business of killing people who believed in democracy and the upbuilding of the race.

The thought of this awful conquest took me back to the time as a very young man I had edited a small newspaper and shouted through its columns a warning to the government that then was the time for action to save the younger generation from this invasion of this destructive element with it vicious propaganda. I knew they were trying to gain power for themselves to prevent the free opportunity in America of other elements just as strongly insistent upon gaining a foothold for their children. It was about that time that a Department of Education was created by forward looking congressmen, only to find later they were blocked by the measures taken by other congressmen who, perhaps unknowingly, represented the factions most adverse to the cause of civilization.

The "Legion Forever" they might sing—that was all they would ever do—sing, so long as they depended upon men of Creel's caliber and methods to carry out their program of conquest. He was probably paid and paid highly for his work, but so crude and horrible were his methods that I knew he could meet with only disaster. The sooner that disaster came to him the more lives would be saved; for God knew where he would turn next in his conquest of the cities of the world.

You perhaps wonder how one could be in the midst of such a tangle, perhaps facing death, and think such thoughts. I must confess myself this much; I am not modest. Therefore I can explain that just so long as I had an incentive to live I wanted to live for the betterment of the world. My incentive lay sleeping in that chair—Diane. At least I thought her asleep until Captain Benton arose impatiently and tried the door. It did not give. He stepped back. Suddenly he pulled from his pocket an old-fashioned jack knife and began cutting through the tapestried wall and into the aluminum that constituted the bulkhead.

At first I was amazed at his recklessness. But I dared not try to stop him. He was a man of iron, one of the most famous pilots in the world, and his judgment was better than my own, I thought.

This did not prove altogether true, realizing what we faced when he had finished cutting a hole large enough to give us a view of the saloon. He was the first to look through the hole. He stepped back quickly, and then I put my head through and looked. The sight that met my eyes, while gruesome, was more welcome than anything I had ever seen in my life.

Forward in the control room, partitioned off from the saloon by glass, air tight and sealed in, were Creel and his four men, all smothered by a great mass of "multiple" which had somehow escaped into the room. And now it was left for us to hurry out and somehow control the plane until a rescuer came.

Once having cut a hole large enough through which to escape the tiny room, Benton waved his men forward through a door and out upon the great transparent wing. Diane and I remained in the saloon while he started an auxiliary motor and applied a suction hose to the port hole in the control room where the five lay stiff and stark after an hour's burial under the smothering "multiple".

When they had finally cleared the room and we were skimming across the water and rising into the air, the captain came in to say that we were on our way back to the good old United States where bandits used mild machine guns; and Legion propaganda would be stifled by an efficient government and good schools; and where a girl with a fiery spirit could marry the man of her choice, instead of avenging the murder of another. And Diane was looking at me when he said all that!

So passed the last effort of the Legion on the western hemisphere. It was a feeble, futile effort, so we learned when we returned to Los Angeles the second morning, and it did their organization so much more harm than good that they have never tried again. Beautiful Valparaiso was a city of the dead until the second day when the Legion returned to find the "multiple" had receded and began making ready for a wholesale burial and a celebration which never took place, for behind them as they passed into the city was an army of Chilean constabulary, and overhead droned the "mosquito swarm", the tiny one-man planes belonging to the International police of the nations of the world.

Of all the strife and turmoil and destruction and death, no one had gained a thing save I. And Diane was overjoyed to again touch American soil and know that she was home. If we ever adventure together again into the world of plots and intrigue and mystery we shall do so together.

THE END

The Martian Nemesis

(*Continued from Page* 251)

"My God, it was one of the Martian Nepenthes!" I cried out in a terrible frenzy. The others came running towards me. Together we hacked the dreadful thing to bits, and cut open the pitcher, but it was too late.

"A rag and a bone, and a hank of hair" was all that was left of my darling."

We buried the poor remains in the desert: I had lost everything, and got a memory in return. We burned up the loathsome weeds and saturated the ground with salt. It was all clear to me now. This must be the site of Ray Browne's grave. When his satchel burst open, the rhizomes and seeds were flung all about the hole, and there they had lain for years in the dry soil, to be quickened at last by the flow of water from the borings. It was Nemesis, the Martian Nemesis.

It was clear to me now too, why Mary had taken her dear life. Worrying over the irrigation company, I must have resorted to my old habit of talking in my sleep, but instead of my conscious mind working, I had subconsciously recited the whole horrible story of the Martian trip. She had learned I had killed her lover; she had fled from me in horror, and thrown herself into the river. And now my last consolation, my boy, the apple of my eye, joyously climbing and playing with youthful zest, had been filched from me, devoured by this hideous legacy from the man I had murdered!

The world knows the rest of my life-story. How, since that horrible time, I have sought death in a thousand ways, and had the praises of the mob showered upon me for risking the life I was trying to lose. How, since that blank day, I have hunted wild animals in the jungle, joined with bold spirits in their conquest of the polar regions, laughed in the face of death on the track, on the water, and in the air, only for death to laugh back at me. Instead of breaking my neck, I have only broken records, and made the name of Stewart Knightlow ring in the ears of the world, when it stank in my own nostrils.

But some day, the tender oblivion I seek will come, and then the true story of my life can be broadcast, for I am too much of a coward to face the crowd in life, just as I am too much of a craven to take deliberately my own life. Ray Browne's taunt was just: my feet are of clay.

* *

The old lawyer put down the manuscript, wiped a tear from his eye, stroked his chin meditatively once or twice, then suddenly cast the papers into the roaring fire.

And so:—They laid him to rest in the bare gaunt abbey: to rest with the great, this greatest one of them all.

THE END.

Three Worlds to Conquer

by **D. D. Sharp**

As the sphere drew nearer a band of bluish light spread above the earth. The band widened and narrowed with pulsing regularity.

RICHARD Holt looked up from the photographic plates as Virginia Stewart skipped across the tile floor.

"What on earth, Dick?" she cried with anxiety gathering in her face.

He regarded her soberly a long moment and then decided she should know the truth.

"Virginia," he began with a calmness in his tone he was far from feeling, "The earth is facing a cataclysm. Look!" He placed a long white finger near a tiny white dot on one of the plates. She leaned forward, watching his face more than the plate.

"A strange star is approaching," he continued earnestly: "A little fellow, dark, but tremendously dense and heavy. For some reason I can't explain, our astronomers never detected it, or never told us about it. I don't know how near it will come to us, but it seems probable there will be some kind of a major catastrophe."

She gave him a frightened look. He smiled but there was no mirth in his eyes.

"That plate was taken a year ago," he went on; "Now look at this." He showed her another and another. "See how it grows. It will soon appear as large as a baseball."

She looked, her slim figure rigid, her hands clenched.

"Have you told anyone?" she asked, facing him.

"Yes, I phoned the papers. They laughed and ignored me. But I think the scientific authorities will have to admit what they know today. There will probably be headlines tonight."

"What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"I thought of a sealed ship, one that could be supplied with oxygen, water and food, which might afford protection should we be drawn away from the earth. But survival would depend on a number of things including a habitable condition of the other planets."

"An ark?" she asked dubiously.

"A modern one," he bit his lips self consciously, "It does sound ridiculous, but there is no other help I can imagine. We haven't time to build one either, my hope is to find something I can remodel to meet the unusual requirements." He laid the plates aside.

"Take me home, Dick," she begged after a little while.

"Sure," he acquiesced and followed bareheaded to her car.

Later that afternoon he went down to the docks to look at a space ship which had been made for an inventor who hoped to make a flight beyond the earth's gravitational pull. The long gray vessel looked good at first sight. It seemed to be a cross between an airplane, a dirigible, and a submarine. It had wings of corrugated steel, a cigar-shaped body, and a periscope.

The inventor explained that it was fitted with sun engines, water, oxygen and provisions for a long voyage. It was watertight, airtight, well insulat- and was propelled by tri-motors, the power derived from gasoline for the take-off only, further power to be supplied by the action of the sun on solarite.* It would be possible, the inventor explained, to carry aboard enough gasoline to propel the ship through our atmosphere or the atmosphere of any planet on which landing was made. The sun engines would be able to work continually after the ship was out of the earth's atmosphere and in the sun's glare and no other power would be needed.

In the hold of the vessel were two great gates through which water could be admitted to sink the vessel and there were giant pumps to empty it in record time. This, the owner explained, was to provide every possible protection on other planets against hostile attacks of other forms of life. Granting of course there were oceans on that planet.

Dick wondered a bit at some of the equipment and ideas the inventor had worked into his ship, but none of them were very objectionable, and many would serve to good advantage under unusual circumstances.

D. D. SHARP

MR. Sharp's stories always stand out because his characters are so real and living. No stilted professors, or god-like heroes walk through his pages; instead there are men and women whose feelings we can perceive and understand.

We have heard much about what would happen if the moon ever approached close to the earth. We are assured by scientists that a terrific cataclysm would occur, perhaps to wipe out a goodly portion of the earth. Certainly the moon would be split asunder by the tremendous strains exerted on it.

But suppose that a duplication occurred of a condition that caused the creation of our solar system. We know that our planets came into existence by the great tides raised on the sun's surface by a star that passed near it aeons ago. If now a new disaster were imminent, there would be needed a new Noah to save his race from extinction. Mr. Sharp tells us about it in a story filled with thrills and excitement.

* Solarite discovered just before the year 1948, was an unstable compound that decomposed under the concentrated rays of the sun and released tremendous stores of energy.

THE inventor admitted frankly that his ship was a great blunder, for he had never been able to taxi it across the trial grounds with enough velocity to lift even the huge weight from the earth. But that did not worry Dick at all, for he would have no need of the ship, unless our terrestrial gravity was so disturbed that not only the ship but much more stable structures would go hurtling up toward the strange star.

The man sold it very cheap, for he was hard pressed for money and disgusted with his scheme. Before buying Dick made known his plans, telling the inventor of the impending danger and offering free passage in the ship. The man raised his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders. But he made the bill of sale with no reservations for any contingency such as Dick mentioned.

For several weeks Dick was busy overhauling the ship and hiring a crew. The tinned stuff was in good shape, the oxygen tanks full, and the machinery well oiled and new. The more he inspected it the more fortunate he felt.

The day after his purchase the city got the news of the impending calamity in a convincing way. The dark star itself could be seen by low powered telescopes close down against the horizon an hour behind the morning sun. Each morning the streets were full of men and women as Dick left for the ship yard. The crowds moved along with a stolid air or resignation, incredulity, or indifference, but here and there small, silent groups stared gloomily at the visitor.

One day a short way up the Avenue he met Kris Dillinger, a local banker.

"Headed this way," Dick warned, "Looks bad!"

"Bosh," Kris ejaculated, and walked away.

Dick hurried on to his ship.

No one knew the name of the strange star. Some one called it *Nera* and the name stuck. Newspapers belittled the danger. There was a statement broadcasted, which was signed by Professor Miller, in which the noted scientist stated that in all probability the dark star or planet as it might be, was travelling in an orbit which had brought it close to the earth in ages past and would bring it back in the ages to come. There was nothing to indicate that the last trip had affected the earth materially, unless indeed the story of the flood might be connected up with it in some way.

Calm natured folk went about their usual duties, the excitable ones displayed some panic, and some of the less serious played with the growing influence of the star's gravity. As the star came closer and closer, a good many very active young men vied each other for high leaps, and eventually some could jump as high as the second story of the National building. Traffic congested the streets, for tires had poor grip on the pavement and speed was dangerous. The weather became unusually clear, no haze, no film of cloud obscured the oncoming stranger as it swelled larger and larger in the heavens. And then one day Nera cut the outer disc of the sun. Dick took this as a signal to get Virginia aboard the ship. The crew had been living there for two days now. He called her by phone, but something in the close proximity of the cosmic visitor caused such a buzzing and pounding in the phone as to make conversation impossible so he hung up and started for her house.

Nera hung low toward the west, for the sun was almost down, and Dick found he could make unbelievable speed. He sensed the gravitational pull of the passing star and sometimes his leaps carried him sixty feet at a jump. He vaulted along, passing large crowds of frightened men and women, who stood dumbly staring helplessly at the ominous shadow in the heavens.

As the sphere drew nearer a band of bluish light spread above the earth, a kind of corona which grew in brightness and sharpness until it became that vivid electrical green which is sometimes seen when high-voltage wires are shorted. The more Dick watched it and the more dazzling it became, the less he was able to account for it. Though he did have an idea that it might be caused by strange electrical phenomena set up by the two bodies. After a few minutes the great band widened and narrowed with pulsing regularity and once a long twisting bolt of fire slipped free and streaked outward to burst far out in the cosmos sprinkling that sector of the heavens with tiny blue and yellow stars.

Then another band of light gathered from nowhere, to spread fanwise closer above the earth. Flames of red and bluish green played about its edge, while zigzag bolts of lightning flashed between the band and the earth. Crashing thunder followed crash with incessant rolls. Terrified mobs milled about like frightened cattle as the earth trembled under their feet.

The Storm Breaks

DESPAIRING at the puny strength he could pit against such forces, Dick hurried ahead. He reached Grand Avenue in a daze at the sight of these cosmic storms. Every detonation was more thunderous than the last, every flash more brilliant and terrible.

He passed through the stone gates of Virginia's home and ran up the walk just in time to see the towering whiteness of the National Building split by a dazzling bolt of fire. The gigantic structure writhed drunkenly. Granite and debris poured downward into roil of smoke and dust, baring twisted ribs of structural steel.

He took the steps at a leap and flung open the front door. Inside he stood a moment calling loudly, his voice all but drowned by the roar outside. Blinded by the electrical flares, the house seemed very dark. He opened the library door and peered about the room. The tall windows glared blues and greens. Walls and floors quivered. Pictures swung violently. Books tumbled from their shelves. No one was in the room.

He turned back to the hall, and shouted mightily, but the mad whine of sirens, the frightened screams of men and women, the moaning whistle of a new born gale and the incessant peal of thunder howled him down.

In the hall he met Kris. The banker's long mane of yellow hair was disheveled, his bulging

eyes were wide and wild, and his long face had the greenish hue of stained wax.

"Where? Where?" he chattered.

"I don't know, " Dick gasped, "She's gone!"

"Lost?"

"Yes. I can't imagine what happened to her."

Kris stood dumbly with his jaws working in spasms of terror. Finally words came, vague and shrieking, smothered in the roaring bedlam from the sky and streets.

"You lie!" he screeched loud enough to override the pealing thunder and the rising whine of the ungodly wind. "You're trying to ditch me!"

"She is nowhere around here. Let's look upstairs!" Dick shouted back.

Kris blinked his bloodshot eyes as though trying to unravel a puzzle in his bewildered brain. He seemed insane, with the green and blue fires glittering upon the big whites of his bulging eyes.

"Great Lord," he gasped at last, "You mean the girl?" His wildly distorted expression showed a measure of relief, "I've been following you to find the ship!"

Dick had no time to give to the man, crazy as he was with terror and anxiety for some kind of refuge. He left Kris in the hall and sprang upstairs, clearing the broad flight at a single leap, turned at the landing and leaped into the upstairs hall and rushed to Virginia's room. That too was empty with a forsaken and disordered appearance of hasty flight. Drawers and clothes closets were open with garments scattered on bed and chairs. She must have gone to the ship. He had missed her on his westward flight.

He ran into the hall and dropped downstairs. The windows were awash with water as he passed them and a shattered window was allowing the waves to drench the lower hall.

A door crashed, and through it rammed the wheel of a flying truck. Disregarding the peril of the hurtling debris outside the house, Dick tore open a trembling door and plunged into the yard. He was blinded and almost taken from his feet by the wash of angry waters which ripped along on the wings of the violent wind. About him hurled a chaos of tumbling barrels, boxes, autos, trucks and men. Everything not securely anchored was skidding and bounding before the wind, like tumble weeds feeling the first vigor of a winter gale. Lack of gravitation, or rather the neutralizing pull from Nera, put all loose objects as playthings for the gale.

The sky above was clear as a bell, except of course for that quaking, crackling band of electric blue.

He tasted brine. The sea? Then that was the answer to the puzzle of a clear sky and the drenching flood. The wind was sweeping up the sea and pouring it upon the city. This gave him new concern for the girl. Anxiety became acute. It was a dull dead ache from which hope had almost gone. Unless Virginia had left long before, she would have little chance as she tried to cross the narrow neck of land on which the ship was housed.

Out there she would meet the full force of wind and sea. Strong as he was, he was having a hard time keeping on the ground where there were buildings and trees to break the wind. Desperately he started for the ship. This time his way across town was harried and obstructed. Nera was pulling against him, the wind was against him, and the air was full of flying things.

CHAPTER II.

The Tomb of Silence

ONLY by clinging to fallen wires and hugging the shelter of swaying buildings could he make progress at all. Often he would gain a yard to be lifted and carried back fifty feet or more. As the storm increased he abandoned hope of walking upright and got down on hands and knees. Battered, discouraged, almost whipped, he came at last to the twelve-foot fence which surrounded the ship.

Fifty yards beyond the fence was the great iron shed which housed the ship. It was banging and roaring to the pulse of the storm. Its windows were black holes from which the sash had been torn away. Its iron plates still held, but they shook and howled as the building itself swayed giddily.

Dick grabbed the mesh of wire and got to his feet. That building was sure to go. It couldn't last many minutes in the claws of the wind. He had to hurry. There wasn't a second to lose. Hand over hand he worked his way along the fence until he came to the west gate. There he found a gap where the big gates had been torn off. Kris was there clinging to a post. Dumb terror and despair was worked into every feature as he cringed beside that impassable gap in the fence.

Dick shouted at him, but Kris clung to his post and gave no sign whether he could hear or not. Dick crouched and tried to devise some plan, but it was quite plain it would be impossible to reach the shed from this side of the yard. The howling wind, burdened with spray, drove across the narrow peninsula with a velocity no man could hope to combat. There was only one thing to do, to go back and work around to the east gate so that he could have the wind to his back.

With tight jaws he turned about and fought back the way he had come. Often his whole length was straightened before the force of the wind. Increasing floods of salt water rolled over him for so long he thought he must surely drown, and every minute that crackling detonating lightning burst nearer and nearer, until it seemed certain his courageous flight would be cut short by it.

But he did gain the east gate and released his hold on the wire as he leaped into the wind. He was bowled over and over, lifted and shot across the hundred yard enclosure with such force as to bang him against the iron shed with his breath taken away. He gasped for air and leaned drunkenly against the iron walls, trying to rally his shattered wits.

The big iron shed groaned and rumbled—protesting that it could not stand the strain another second. The world about had grown darker ex-

cept for the interminable flashing of that band of light and the zigzag bolts of fire. The black limb of Nera was edging further across the sun, and in the settling darkness those electric flares were ghastly and unreal.

Virginia must have seen him coming, for she darted from the east door of the shed and was dashed against the wall by the paw of the wind. She tried to reach him as he gathered himself together. He shouted for her to go back, but she came on, pounded and battered by the wind. He struggled along the wall and reached her, picked her up and with the remaining strength in his big body, succeeded in getting back through the open door.

Slowly the black disk closed out the sun. A ghastly wounded night flooded the unprepared earth.

Dick pulled Virginia into the ship and stood a moment looking across the seething ocean as it came rolling in toward the land. It seemed some kind of titanic monster, springing from its lair, than only a regularly breathing expanse of water. It was doubling into itself, sweeping in with increasing velocity. It swelled into titanic ranges, one towering behind the other until it bewildered the eye and the senses.

VIRGINIA got to her feet. Dick cut the switch which closed the door, just as Kris struggled into the shed ahead of a wash of tide. Dick hesitated, glanced at Virginia for approval, and opened the switch. He was risking their lives by the delay in closing the door, but he had no heart to bar Kris from refuge. Kris pushed through the open door just as a great wave caught the shed, collapsed it and tilted it off of the space ship. Water poured into the small entrance room before Dick could get it closed.

Everything loose in the room was tumbling back and forth as Dick turned to Virginia and got her into a belt which would hold her when the ship turned turtle, which it was threatening to do with every wash of the tidal wave. There was no time to warn the crew who were already in the engine room. They would know what to do by this time. And then one of the big ranges of water must have hit the ship for it stood on end, its tail skyward as it spun around and around with a suck of the current.

Dick clung to the controls and buckled himself in. The gauges showed that water pressure was increasing with every second, though he had no idea how they could be diving deeper and deeper here on the solid earth.

The thunder and whistle of the wind were now displaced by a dead quiet. Whatever wash there was to the waves did not sound through the insulation of the ship. Dick glanced at the port hole. On it was green water lighted by long flashes of vivid light. He cut a switch which slipped steel protectors over the glass. The entire room became inky dark. He switched on the lights. Kris growled about being cold and wet. Virginia shivered visibly but made no complaint.

Dick had no way of heating the room in such a storm. He must conserve his power for unknown emergencies; and the ship rolled and tossed about so that any kind of fire was out of the question. The three loose chairs in the control room were flung wildly about, banging against walls, ceiling and floor with such violence as to break and splinter.

Dick was alarmed as one struck close to Virginia, but again there was nothing he could do but censure himself for lack of forethought in leaving them in the room. He swung about in his belt and waited for a chance to grab any that came near him. He knew, should he unbuckle his belt and attempt to reach the flying chairs, he would but add the bulk of his own body to the menace.

This chaotic condition lasted for a while and then he noticed that the chairs landed with less violence, and he had a queer sense of losing weight, as though his bulk was somehow flowing away. Then he realized suddenly there was no sense of weight at all. A dead silence had followed the chaos of the storm. He could not tell which was straight up or down. He unbuckled his belt and pushed himself out of his chair. With a bit of surprise he found himself floating to the ceiling. He braced himself for a blow, but he landed as lightly as a toy balloon.

Close to the ceiling he hung suspensed, amused at the incredulous expression upon the faces of Kris and Virginia. Then he gave another push which sent him back to the chair before the controls. Satisfied with his attempt to explore the new influences, he buckled himself back in his belt and joked with Virginia about his air flight. He knew that conversation was forced and unnatural, but the dead quiet of the room, the strange weightlessness, the wild journeys of his unfettered imagination when it considered what might be taking place upon the earth, were unpleasant companions. Conversation, ridiculous and out of place as it was, was a sedative both he and the girl needed. Kris took no part, but hung sullenly onto his belt, swearing now and then at the increasing cold.

Hours passed. Dick's artificial garrulity wore itself out. The deadening silence was becoming unendurable, with not even the wash of waves nor the tick of a clock to count it out.

An Unbelievable Situation

AFTER a while Dick began a song. A song of the humming bees down on the old plantation, and of negroes happy in their work upon the levees. Its melody was soothing, and his voice, a bit uncertain at first, gathered enthusiasm, and started another and then another, rising into the stirring airs of his school days, and drifting along into love songs which held the peace of balmy nights and moonlight on full blown roses.

Even Kris responded to the mood and forgot to swear at the uncomfortable cold. And Dick, feeling that in some way his songs were giving hope and courage, sang on and on. The tense, expectant hours crept by and brought them nearer and nearer to the crisis—the denouement whose nature none of them dared even to try and guess.

When at last a semblance of weight seemed to seep back into his oddly vacant body, Dick heard a faint wash against the hull. He stopped singing and listened. Waves were beating softly but soon increased their babble until they were like thunder on the steel.

To the tune of the growing noise was the heave and roll of the ship. Again the chairs jazzed and flew about the room as first one wall and then another seemed transposed into the floor.

Dick started the engines and gave the motors quarter speed. The ship wallowed about and ploughed through them bucking stem and stern, but with a fairly even keel. He pulled the switch which opened the steel protectors over the porthole glass. The glass was blurred with spray, but later when it cleared he left the controls and looked out.

Wave rode by swiftly from the rim of an endless sea!

"Why there's no sight of land!" Virginia exclaimed.

He turned to find her beside him. She stood very slim and erect, a bit pale and fatigued, but with no hint in her face of the apprehension which might lie deep behind her blue gray eyes. She stood so stiffly erect Dick thought she might be afraid to unbend, afraid that she might not so bravely defy the unknown menace of that vast vacant sea. Her searching, unflinching gaze seemed to read some dire verdict in the unending circle of water beyond the porthole.

Dick wanted to say something to comfort her, but he could find no sincere hope to offer. He felt the answer to their predicament was even more serious than Virginia might guess. Her friends, her home, her kind were gone. Only the space ship and its crew, of all that had lived on earth, could be alive. So what could he do, more than cling to her cold trembling hand and offer the companionship of one helpless human being to another caught in the swirl of relentless cosmic force.

As he stood silently wondering what he should say, the crew burst into the room. Still he waited, ignoring their excited, rumbling questions. His whole thought was of her who stood so mutely beside him, and he tried to think of some way of softening the ache of her iron resignation. She had meant much to him in the peaceful days before the catastrophe. She meant much more now. Yet what was there he could do? All the old factors of their lives were wiped away like pretty scrawls upon a schoolgirl's slate. Every thing they had loved and planned was buried eternally, deep as the angry yellow sea outside.

Not that those waters flooded the earth, far from it? A strange thing had happened, indeed, it was so strange, so unreal, and improbable as to leave him bewildered by the facts which thrust themselves upon him.

Earth was far, far away, so far he doubted that any of them would ever step upon its solid, comfortable soil again. *Nera had stripped the oceans away from it, and made of them spheres of water, and spun them in space, a thousand miles away.*

How did Dick know this? Easy enough. There up at the zenith was the earth, big and radiant, yellow and glowing, like an open umbrella upside down high above the ship!

Nera was far above it, a dull ashy balloon ascending into the sky. There was no sun, but the sea was flooded with a golden luminosity from the earth, which gave the waves a copperish cast, and caught Dick's thoughts into fantastic channels. Put him to wondering just where was the line between fact and fancy. For the earth was not the only strange body in the heavens. Close against the horizon, was a silver ball of extreme brightness. It was far more brilliant, for its size, than the earth, and it puzzled him for a while.

VIRGINIA leaned against him wearily, as though she had at last yielded to the weight of the appalling tragedy. As though it had bent the iron of her resolution. He put an arm about her and stared silently at the silver ball.

The crew had sensed that some unusual calamity had befallen them, and they stood in a little semi-circle, grimy, overall-clad men, as though bowed to the presence of the angel of death. In that strange interlude of quiet it came to Dick, almost as a revelation, what the silver ball was. Two spheres of water had been formed by the passing of the dark star. They had been ripped away, but had not, in the short peak of Nera's influence, been able to attain a velocity sufficient to follow her, and so had been *left to form satellites of the earth!*

"Hey!" Kris broke in, "Think you are at a funeral? Somebody turn on the heat, I'm cold!"

Dick turned slowly about and thrust his long white hands into water-soaked pockets. He was cold too, and he knew that Virginia must be also.

"Better go and change your things, Virgie," he said gently.

She left silently.

Dick turned on Kris.

"Listen," he said a bit belligerently, "You'd better borrow some clothes and get dry. Cook's about your size."

"Cook?" Kris sniffed, "I'd rather dry out."

"It may be a long time before there is enough heat in the vessel for you to dry out," Dick answered tersely.

"Why?" Kris demanded.

"Just this, but it's for you and the crew, I don't want Virginia to know. This ship was built for space flying."

"Yeah? What's that got to do with turning on the heat?"

"Just the simple little fact that sun engines won't run in the shadow. They work fine with sun on the reflectors, but it happens we are on the dark side of this sphere. We'll have to wait until sunup to start the sun engines, and the joker is that I have no idea how long that will be."

Kris stalked over and looked through the porthole. Stared dumbly with a pucker between his brows.

"Am I a cuckoo?" he gasped, wiping a hand across his forehead, "or am I just plain drunk?"

Dick strode back to the control board and

glanced at the thermometer which marked the temperature outside the ship. The short dark line of mercury had caused him much anxiety since he had first noticed it after the steadying of the ship. It had crawled steadily down into itself and every degree mark it shrank put a new depression into his heart. Now it was steady.

That puzzled him, too, although he was glad the drop had halted. He did not understand the freezing temperature on the surface of the sea. The trip through space could not account for it, for the sphere had brought along an envelope of atmosphere, which the instrument board indicated was much warmer than the water.

The crew had noticed him watching the glass and crowded about him. They plied him with questions which he tried to answer encouragingly. He wanted to instil hope into these men who looked to him for leadership, but in truth there was little he could offer that would not depress. He had no idea what caused the chilling of the water, nor how long it would take the tiny planet to turn on its axis. Night might last only a few hours, as on Earth and Mars, or it might last nearly half a month, as it did on the Moon.

He glanced at the thermometer again. Kris noticed his worried look.

"What makes it so cold outside?" he asked.

"I can only guess," Dick answered, deciding to hide nothing from them. "I was very frightened as long as the drop was rapid, but you will notice that it is falling very slowly; now it is almost steady at 30 degrees Fahrenheit. It indicates that whatever caused the warm waters of the summer sea to become frigid, has expended its action, at least whatever caused the rapid drop."

"Well, what's the guess?" Kris demanded.

"It's the churning and mixing of all the waters of the oceans. Although the water at home was quite warm when we took to the ship it has been mixed up in the great swirl which took it from the earth. You have enough experience at sea to know that even in the torrid zones where the surface water is quite warm, deep sea dredges found freezing temperatures in the samples brought to the surface. That seems to me the likely explanation."

"Fine," Kris growled, "but that don't help keep us from freezing, I'm cold."

"Give us some heat," the ship's cook demanded.

"Let me light an oil heater, Dick," McGregor, one of the navigators, suggested. "It will make it more pleasant and burn but a wee bit of fuel."

"Right, MacGregor," Dick answered, glad to do anything he could for the shivering men.

CHAPTER III.

Adrift

WHEN McGregor had gone after the heater Dick went back to the porthole. He was not surprised to find hoar frost upon the glass. He opened the port. A blast of chill air swept into the room. Kris yelled out a demand to close the glass, but Dick gave him no attention. He stuck head and shoulders far out the hole and surveyed the strange heavens. His breath left his mouth in long vaporous gusts of white mist.

High up were thick clouds, black and heavy with moisture. They gathered swiftly as they scudded across the yellow face of Earth. With a chill in his heart not accounted for by the low temperature, Dick speculated upon the unchanged position of Earth still at the zenith. Upon its yellow surface was the vague outline of mountain ranges, and depths which had once been the sea. It had turned perceptibly on its axis since he had last regarded it.

By all rights its position in the heavens should have shown some change. Beyond an angry fringe of cloud the stars twinkled dimly. Luna was nowhere to be seen, probably hidden by some bank of cloud. Nera and the other ball of water were also out of sight, but the Great Dipper and the familiar North Star were still in plain view.

It was the position of these stars which served to puzzle him still more. Instead of remaining close down against the horizon, they had risen toward the zenith. The dipper handle was near the bright limb of the Earth. He was convinced by then that the world they were on would keep the same face always toward the earth, just as the Moon did. That meant that the night would be much longer than twelve hours. How much longer he had no idea at the moment. Neither did he have any idea how low the temperature on the dark side of the planet would reach before sun up. From the spread of the horizon and his knowledge of the amount of water on the earth's surface before the cataclysm, he knew it could not be many hundred miles to the sunny side of the sphere, but he did know that the small amount of fuel in his tanks would not carry them even within a hundred miles of daylight. However he determined to make the try and meet the sun as far around the sphere as he could. When the sun did come up his sun engines would easily keep him moving at the rate of rotation of the sphere, so that he could keep the sun always in sight.

Deep in thought and puzzling over the responsibilities upon him, he heard nothing going on in the room. The first hint he had of any treachery was a quick powerful shove upon his hips. He felt himself propelled viciously through the porthole. He clutched at the window sills and clawed desperately at the narrow strips of steel, but his fingers found no hold and he slid out and down, head first—struggling, spinning, yelling, straight toward the frothy yellow sea.

Even as he fell he was conscious that his drop did not have the old earth vigor to it. He felt as though he were the victim of a slow motion picture. He hit the sea with small force and his struggles brought him immediately back to the surface. He collected his wits and found that a lazy stroke now and then kept him well above the water—there was no danger of drowning as long as he could stay awake. The danger was in the cold. The water was frigid. His flesh

burned with the sting and the whips of spray put threads of ice into his hair.

Close against the gray hull of the space ship he made out a big bridge timber floating high out of the water. He gained it with a few swift strokes and sat chattering as he tried to make some plan of regaining the ship. The steel hull of the space ship was glazed with ice as far up as he could see. The nearest entrance was far above and it was impossible to climb that swelling ice-coated steel.

He was worried no little about Virginia. He could imagine her terror and helplessness. He hadn't known Kris very long, but he had seen many traits in the man which indicated that he would not give the girl a chance. He would dump her overboard if she did not obey in every particular; and Virginia would never stand submissive with him down there in the sea.

For a long time as he sat there dazedly, the yellow reflection of the earth was high up in the port hole glasses, like dull stupefied eyes watching him with no concern. Then they blazed with a white brilliancy. Kris had closed the big switch which lighted the vessel, wasting the current which would be badly needed during the long night ahead.

Dick began to shout with all his might, calling to Virginia, MacGregor, and the others, and as minutes passed and no answer came, his wet garments froze stiff like boards where they flapped in the wind. He hardly knew why he waited, for certain death could only be beaten by lucky chance and a hard fight. Perhaps he hoped that Virginia would be pushed from the ship. Certainly she would be no worse off, and it might be they could find some shelter in the wreckage upon the sea. In truth he was a little stupefied with the cold. His throat was already hoarse, and it took all of his energy to keep his senses.

HE began to beat his arm about to whip circulation through his body and with the returning sting of the sluggish blood moving faster in his veins and as he called again and again he tried to reason out what probably lay ahead. After all there was no fear of anything lower than arctic temperatures—for this sphere was enveloped in air. His first fright at the possibility of absolute cold had been induced by his knowledge of the temperatures which probably prevailed on the dark side of the moon, but he had overlooked the fact, in his anxiety, that the low temperatures on the moon were possible only by the total lack of an atmosphere.

If the night here lasted no longer than two weeks he could surely prepare to weather it. Even if it lasted six months, as long as the arctic night on Earth, he should be able to gather enough stores and build himself some kind of shelter on the ice which would soon form. He made up his mind to get food and shelter and then get Virginia from the ship. When daylight came they could then devise some way of future existence on the unfriendly sphere.

Using a bit of plank for an oar he paddled his log along the side of the space ship, intending to look about for a larger craft. Again he glanced at the strange, moonlike sphere which had once been their home. The bowl of the Great Dipper was close against it, the handle already eclipsed behind the sphere. Surely that was strange!

Everything was new and strange on this water sphere. The unusual lightness of his body, the yellow hazy light, the dark clouds which seemed so heavy and yet floated so high, the ease with which he could swim about the sea. At every turn he seemed to meet with phenomena which was hard to admit and difficult to accustom himself to its laws, but the next discovery was driven home like a blow. It almost unnerved him, for it took away his returning assurance, and robbed him of any hope of surviving outside of the ship.

The puzzle of the ascending Great Dipper was solved. This Marine sphere revolved not west to east, but south to north! Upon this benighted hemisphere there would never be sunrise! The increasing cold would bite deeper and deeper. Ice would coat the entire sea, thicken and burst under the intolerable pressure. The ship itself would be gripped, wrenched about and ripped into slivers. The only hope was for him to regain control of the ship and in some way make a race to the other side of the sphere.

Far above came the awakening sputter of starting motors. He turned his raft and paddled out from under the overshadowing hull, alarmed —wondering what fool thing Kris might do next. The sputter broke into a roar, as first one engine and then another was warmed up. Dick cleared the overhanging hull and caught the glisten, the propellers being let out of their enclosed pocket. They began to turn and gathered speed. The big ship moved and circled into the wind. It raced across the waters, a gray phantom under the yellow radiance of the half-obscured Earth, leaving Dick in the backwash of its waves.

The space ship, unworkable on Earth, sped forward at the apex of a long gleaming trail of rippling water, and rose gracefully. He saw the water under the bottom of its hull, saw the low stars between the gray ship and the water. It gathered speed, circled and winged its flight over him, its shadow whipping by like a giant bird that had brought him and abandoned him upon this strange cosmic sea. It grew vague and small against the high clouds, it swooped across an unclouded limb of Earth circling higher and higher.

Dick gazed helplessly,—overwhelmed by the stark unbearable feeling of being utterly alone—as the man-made bird grew smaller and smaller against the Earth. It circled higher and higher, fighting up and up, until it became certain Kris was attempting to fly back.

"You big fool!" Dick shouted a little insane from the shock, "Don't try that,—don't! Virginia! Good God—he'll kill her."

Alone!

CERTAINLY Kris must have known that Earth could no longer support life since it had been stripped of its protecting envelope of air. Helpless with rage, Dick could only head his timber into the wash of the higher waves left by the

speeding ship. He was bowled over by a towering wave and carried into the water. He struggled up, flung the icy brine from his eyes and saw the ship again, quite tiny now, as still it circled and circled up and up toward the big Earth. It completely disappeared, came in sight again with the light quick and brilliant upon its ice-clad hull and disappeared finally.

Dick still gazed helplessly, blinking at the place in the sky where he had seen it last, feeling the loneliness of the empty sea, feeling the grip of terror for the fate of the girl he loved. Then he set mechanically about the business of trying to survive. Why, he did not reason out. There was really nothing to live for, no hope of future comfort, or friends, or of her he loved so much.

His new world was more forbidding and desolate than anything he had imagined. All about stretched the restless, forsaken sea, and beyond it the limitless confines of the bare, sterile cosmos, and the only surviving companions were being steered across it by a fool who had no idea of the new laws with which he experimented.

He was the only living thing in all the Universe, at least the chances were great that this was so. He could not last long unless some miracle came to give him means to escape the cold creeping slowly into the lair of unending night.

So this was to be the end of man? The defeat of the logical, constructive fitting of nature's laws to human ends. Cold, death, silence, all the immutable weapons with which space was arrayed, had invaded the strongholds of purpose and laid them to waste. He was not bitter, there was only a despondent, resigned fatalism against which every hope and desire of his heart rebelled but against which but did not know how to fight.

Doggedly, tenaciously, unreasonably it commanded him to carry on, to refuse to admit defeat. He watched until black haze blurred his sight, and then the gathering clouds slowly covered the last bright beam from the Earth's limb, curtained it away as a stage that is darkened, as a scene that is played—as a thing that is done.

The cloud banks hurried on down toward the horizon, tucked in the sea as with a gray wool blanket. Still he waited, listening, half believing he caught the hum of motors, still hoping Kris would turn back. But the only realities were the gathering cloud, the wind, the biting cold.

After a while the wind died. The waves quieted with an unreal startling suddenness. The dead sea was even more desolate and invidious. He paddled here and there hunting some more favorable refuge. He did not analyze that search, did not try to understand why, hopeless and whipped as he admitted himself to be, he kept up the farce of trying to prolong his wretched life.

After a while he came upon a big iron tank floating lazily upon the glasslike surface. It was half submerged and surely contained something. He paddled close and examined it. The screw caps and pipes were all intact and tightly shut. Under the big numerals "39" was lettered, "Airplane gasoline."

What irony! What a slap for Fate to give a man already down and taking the count. Gasoline! An hour before it would have meant salvation for him and Virginia, and the crew. Then he could easily have filled his tanks and made a run for the sunny side of the sphere. Now, it mocked him, ridiculed his desire to live, his desire that Virginia might live. Gasoline, and the ship gone forever!

He wanted to slump down, bury his head in his hands and cry like a broken-hearted boy. Instead he grimly climbed up the iron ladder which was fastened to the side of the tank.

Wet and cold he paced about the ice clad top, whipping his arms against his chest and kicking life into his numb feet. Under him was fuel enough to warm a thousand men if he could only use it. He had no matches, but even if he devised a way to gain a spark of fire, there was the problem of doing it without an explosion.

Now he must have a bucket and some dry wood. The sea was littered with debris of all kinds, boxes, barrels, auto tires, furniture, myriads of floating things which had been sucked up in the vortex of churning water as it swept the city. Most of the stuff was broken into bits by the force of the water, but here and there a box or barrel rode intact left unharmed by freaks of the storm. As he stood regarding the wreckage, his teeth chattered and his body ached with cold, but his wits devised no solution.

HIS dumb gaze shifted skyward as he wondered again what had happened to Virginia. Something was peculiar about the clouds. He hadn't noticed it at first, lost in the vagaries of his wandering thoughts, but it soon demanded his attention. A white canopy was trailing below the cloud banks, hiding them in places. It hung above him far flung, motionless, like a great white veil. He watched it with the unconcern of one who can no longer be surprised. Prepared for any strange phenomenon on this weird place, he shrugged his wet shoulders and began a quest for dry clothing and something which would keep life in his body.

A huge box caught his attention. It rode high out of the water, its wet sides glowing in the Earthlight. He leaped into the water and with considerable effort, despite the slight gravitational pull, he managed to reach it and pull it to the top of his iron island. There he pried loose the boards, finding to his delight that under it was a solid covering of aquatite.* Using a bit of wreckage as a lever, he dragged out the contents. There were dozens of suits of underwear, all fat men's sizes, *and dry!* Union suits, BVD's, shorts and longs of all types. Unmindful of the incongruity of this attire, he stripped off the watersoaked garments and chattering to the naked wind, he crawled into three union suits, one over the top of the other.

Dry at last, he felt better, and tore up some of the garments and rigged out a rope with a wide noose, so that he could lasso other wreckage without having to leave his refuge.

Busy with his scheme, he did not look skyward for a long time, not until the gathering

*A composition paper impervious to water.

gloom called his attention to the descending veil which he had first thought quite stationary.

It hung lower like a creamy, misty pall over the whole sea. He frowned, but gave it little more attention. He wanted food. The rigorous cold had roused a gnawing hunger and despite his dry clothes he was chilled and uncomfortable. For half an hour he cast his noose with varying success, but nothing edible yielded to his cast. Shirts, overalls, and sheets were the sum of his salvage.

Discouraged he piled up the shirts, underwear and sheets to make a fairly comfortable bed and crawling down into them he lay quiet and tried to sleep. He did succeed in dozing a little, but the cold crept in and what sleep he did get was fitful and restless. Finally he gave it up and crawled out from under his pile of dry goods to light a fire and make use of the store of gasoline under him.

Outside the cover he surveyed a new world. Something had happened to the earth glow. It was blanketed in haze. He looked about a bit startled by the thick murk. The whole sea was swaddled with a white canopy, which floated just above his head. None of it fell or touched the sea. It was much as though it had settled down upon a great skylight of glass. Not motionless exactly for it was descending evenly, very, very slowly—like shadows creeping into a valley—settling slowly down to the face of the sea.

Dick knew what danger lurked in that descending veil. When the curtain fell everything would be obscured. If he was to find refuge from the long night ahead he had to strike out at once. He slid from the tank onto his beam and paddled ahead. He went in a straight line for several minutes to look about for any possible boat. There was only the same general litter as he had found about the gasoline tank. Again he paddled for several minutes more and repeated the search. Now the white veil was so close as to reach to his head. It was like a vast circus top being let down upon him. It had an oppressive nearness that reminded him of a time long ago when he was a little boy caught under the floor of a great house.

He tried to move away from it. It mocked him, it set him into an insane fury. He put greater effort into his strokes. His improvised paddle swept up great swirls of water which left ripples far back and started bits of wreckage to bobbing all about. His one hope was a ship that might some way have weathered the chaos. He felt that one must be waiting for him. That much was only fair, since everything else had failed. Surely one of the hundreds that had been in the harbor when the dark star passed, had wallowed up with its bulkheads unbroken. Yet his frantic search went on and on without any sign of success.

He passed great islands of peculiar looking flesh, broken and fissured, either by the churning waters or the release from the great pressure which had been at the lower depths of the oceans. They were weird, grotesque things, some of them still phosphorescent. Many with wide, leaf-like flippers, some with long hoselike tentacles. He paddled away from the unsightly masses, threading the litter of boxes, barrels, auto tires, carcasses of horses, cows, and now and then birds and wild animals. Bodies of dead people were here but not many considering the number of those on earth who must have been swept away with the flood.

And as he paddled, disregarding all small salvage, in his search for some kind of cover, the great white tent fell slowly about him, until it rested squarely upon the sea.

He was trapped!

CHAPTER IV.

No Longer a Savage!

ONLY the sheerest chance would take him within sight of a derelict ship, if there was such a thing on this ungodly sphere. He wished himself back upon the iron tank. Desolate and open as it was, it was much better than the rigorous sea.

He paddled feverishly, and stood up to look about. All he could see was a hazy circle of calm water; a sad, weird, yellowish world, spotted with snowflakes which did not fall. The long, inert body of a woman, blurred, but unmistakable, with head hung down into the transparent water, floated into the narrow circle of his vision. Of course she was dead, but with her face down she seemed searching the depths for a companion, someone she had lost and could not rest without. It was ghastly, unnerving.

He paddled away, leaving her bobbing in the ripples of his retreat. Somehow that frightful thing had awakened a new anxiety about Virginia. He could not give up. He had to believe that the space ship would come back. Virginia would manage it some way. She would make Kris turn back. Even now she might be somewhere out there in the gloom. She was daring and resourceful and would be more than a match for Kris's strong body and dull wits.

He would find her, board the ship and conquer Kris. And yet even as he hoped, he knew there was little chance of his finding the ship if Kris suddenly decided that he was necessary even if it returned to the Marine sphere. Even in the safety of the vessel there was little probability that the man could ever steer it back to a safe landing here. The ship's compass had been unbalanced by the new magnetic fields, and the sky was filled with that snow curtain which would confuse the most skillful navigator. And Kris was only an amateur airplane pilot. And still Dick paddled on, refusing to give up hope.

That white veil fretted him. It dragged at his courage. It was baffling, mysterious, disquieting. Great stationary flakes of it packed the air, like tufts of cotton hung thickly upon invisible threads. A fake snow storm of vast proportions, and yet it was intangible. It gave before his advance and evaded his grasp. A motion of his hand set it all aflutter. It swirled and fled at the slightest breath of air.

Something loomed ahead. Something dark

and big, like the turret of a gunboat. He paddled toward it, his heart pounding excitably. He recognized it with astonishment and disappointment. He had been moving in a circle. It was the gasoline tank!

With a bit of gratitude, even in his disappointment, he crawled to the top again and exchanged his wet garments for dry ones. Then sliding under the folds of his shakedown bed, he lay shivering until he could no longer endure the inactive submission to the cold and gloom. He got up now, with a plan. From the dry goods box he secured a piece of fairly dry wood. Next he got his pocket knife from the wet trousers he had dropped upon the tank. They were frozen stiff, but he managed to extract his knife.

From the wood he made a bow and strung it with string improvised from a shirt. Next he made a wheel of wood and punctured it at the center. Through this hole he passed a lancelet of wood and around the lancelet he gave a twist of the bowstring. This completed his firestick. He placed the point of the lancelet upon a block of wood and against it he laid a circle of cloth which he had soaked in gasoline.

Now he began to saw upon the bow, as he held the lance against the block by another upon its head. The lance revolved swiftly as he worked his bow back and forth, and the wood began to scorch. He worked faster as he smelled the delicious scent of hot pine. Faster and smoke began to turn . . . faster, a spark glowed red! He dropped his stick and blew upon it. The gasoline soaked cloth burst into flame.

Fire! He was a savage no longer!

He leaped to his feet and wadded up some underwear and crawled down to the petcock to soak it in gasoline. Back at his fire he dropped the dripping garment into the blaze. Flames roared up into the veil of snow. He put on more fuel and was soon warm and comfortable for the first time since he had left the earth.

His next task was to find something to eat. He piled new fuel upon the fire, and again boarded the big timber. The snow still wrapped his entire world within its mysterious draperies, but he knew the fire would make a beacon to lead him back to his iron island. Mounting his "craft" again he paddled boldly away.

Half a mile or more from his tank, he was rewarded. A barrel of cookies was his first find. The cakes were soaked with water, but he pulled them up on his log and turned about toward the light. As he paddled he ate his fill of the sweet, soggy cakes.

AN hour later beside his fire with thirst tormenting him he wished he had left the cookies where he had found them. The snow tantalized him. He walked about the tank touching his tongue to flake after flake. They melted like goldfish food in the mouth of a shark and with as little relief. Not a trickle reached his throat.

In spite of his thirst his mind was on Virginia. Hours had passed since the ship took off and it must either have broken away from the Marine's gravitation or had failed again and was somewhere out there in the night. Yet the more he thought of it the more certain he became that Kris would turn back.

He put more fuel upon his fire. He shouted loudly into the desolate waste which spread all about. Determined to find out if Virginia could be anywhere near he returned to his raft. A mile from his beacon it appeared as a dim star of light. That was as far as he dared go at first, so he started a wide circle, calling out every few strokes, but no answer came to him, not even an echo of his own voice. It was lost in the hazy veil as much as he was on the Marine sphere.

After a bit he felt a vaporous cold as though ice was near. A soft breeze blew in freshly chilled as though it had passed over an ice field. The temperature was cold, but it was not the dry cold of falling temperature nor yet the feel of cold air across the sea. Ice was the only answer to it. And yet he knew there could be no ice, for he was on the midnight pole and the water had not frozen around him as yet. He set the whole business down to his upset imagination and then he saw that there was ice. A great berg lifted almost in front of him. He had to paddle swiftly to keep from ramming his log into it. It swelled and grew, heaving up from beneath until it caught him and his log and lifted them high above the water. He stood upon its glassy surface and endeavored to get his log back into the water, but all around him cake upon cake of ice wallowed up to cover the entire surface.

He abandoned the idea of the log. It was useless in that field of ice. He could leap from cake to cake and get back to his fire. Even as he surveyed the bewildering miracle he wondered where it had come from. And the more he pondered the more mysterious it seemed, for it thickened and grew amazingly.

Soon he became alarmed. His beacon was weaving and jumping weirdly as though some phantom had plucked it from the tank and was using it in a ghoulish dance. The ice was toying with the gasoline tank. He leaped from cake to cake, making unbelievable speed, but he did not run far. There came a burst of flame-lined smoke, a scattering of spluttering blaze, a thundering roar. Dick stopped, sick at heart. His tank had exploded. The pressure of the gathering ice must have opened its seams.

He walked slowly onward toward the fire. A warm heat reached him. The snow flakes faded away. The blaze burned a conelike hole up through the snow. It penetrated up to the slatelike cloud far above, which yielded to the heat to let down a spot of Earthlight, pale and wan in contrast with the lurid glimmer on the ice.

The flame spread, in a widening circle about the ice. The heat grew until it was unpleasant even where he stood. All about him ice crystals glittered and winked. Thirst became acute. Remembering that sea ice ejected four-fifths of its salt as it froze, and hoping it might assuage his thirst, he picked up a sliver of ice and sucked at it. It tasted good. He rolled his tongue over it in astonishment. There was no saltiness at all!

Snow ice or fresh water ice, surely! But

where had it come from? Another mystery of that strange watery sphere.

Then he found something flat and black. A seal! The Arctic? Of course that was the solution. As the water left the earth it had carried with it the vast ice fields of the north and south seas, and now that the churning of the water was quieted, it was rising to cover the entire sphere. It would soon pack down and thicken. A new menace threatened Virginia and the ship if they had been lucky enough to come back. The space ship must already be surrounded wherever it might be on the watery sphere, and with escape cut off it would soon be frozen in and crushed.

Warfare!

HE sat disconsolately upon an ice cake and watched the gasoline burn itself out. A stark, dead silence was all about except for the crunch of rising ice cakes, and that too was dead like the thud of spaded dirt. Eternal night had brought its companion, eternal silence, to bed with it. It was a lifeless place. Even death has its semblance of life. On Earth it meant the ending of that which had been. It had beauties and joys which were not without solace to the bereaved. But here everything was lifeless. This frigid hemisphere grew nothing, nurtured nothing, bred no good nor lovely thing. He alone was sentient in the vast graveyard of ghoulish things. His iron nerve was near the break as he stared bewildered into the maze of snow.

He was Adam thrust from the Garden. The last man instead of the first!

How long he remained staring into the haze he never recalled. But sometime later his dejected mood was broken by a distant stuttering rattle like rifle fire!

The ship! Then Virginia was back! A miracle —a resurrection!

Tossing an auto tire on the fire, he put vim into his legs as he leaped from ice cake to ice cake in the direction of the sound. Ahead of him the mysterious night, the murk, the hazy, empty loneliness no longer was a thing of horror. Virginia was there to fire his courage. He dashed on fearing no penalty the desolate waste could exact.

After several hundred yards of swift running he stopped and shouted. The gunfire had stopped with the first scattering volley. Now dead silence hovered all about again. No one answered him.

He looked over his shoulder. His beacon had failed or he had covered more ground than he thought. Surely he must be quite near the ship. He shouted again. There was no answer. Only silence followed his cry. An intense hush that was broken only by the crack and crunch of ice.

Perhaps he had again travelled in a circle. Perhaps he was lost?

He smiled a bit ironically, his cheeks wrinkling painfully, they were so chilled. One spot of this nightmare was about like another. Lost from what? His fire? It would do him little good when the extreme cold settled. Earth? It was probably as desolate and barren as this icy sphere.

Virginia! The cracked lips drew thin. She was all he had to lose. All that could make life on this place bearable at all. After all it was something of this kind which had made Earth itself bearable. Men had lived, worked, planned, and accomplished—with the knowledge that they were but spawn that would perish—all because their lives held the leaven of love. He must find her. A little of the panic he had fought so stoically seeped into his heart and he cried out frantically, shout after shout, running about here and there until he was entirely confused as to which direction the ship might lie.

There it came again, volley upon volley, no signal surely—there was fighting? Virginia was in danger! Perhaps she was making a stand against Kris!

With his concern for her life, his own panic died. He was his old calm, assured self again. He hurried forward but plans of attack were drumming through his head. He had no gun, but he was sure he could outwit Kris by his superior knowledge of the phenomena existing on Marine.

A bullet whinged past his ears. Despite the warning Dick ran straight toward the report. The ship towered into the snow veil, only vaguely defined. Its lights were out but now and then a spurt of orange flame burst from a port high up in its bulk.

DICK saw a dark form upon the ice. He ran to it and stooped down. The cook was sprawled out sticky with blood, warm but certainly dead. Dick grabbed the gun which had dropped near an out-flung arm and crept forward more cautiously. A few feet further he came upon a great barrier of ice. It was at least ten feet high and probably twenty or more wide. Wondering the why of it he crawled over it and found the ship floating in a narrow pool of water. Evidently the crew had been working to keep the ship free of ice, but no one was about although here and there cakes were rising and skim ice glowed palely on the narrow circle of open water.

"Hello the ship!" he shouted, taking any risk to find Virginia.

High up against the dark hull flashed an oval of light, and O'Malley's disorderly mop of red hair pushed through the port hole as a blade of light dipped here and there, as though searching for him. Fifteen or twenty feet beyond it glinted upon steel. It whipped down a rifle barrel to reveal Kris sprawled against the ice. An orange flash burst from the rifle. The flash fell, slowly, twirling round and around as though let down by a string, as though it were one of those slow motion pictures. A beam of it caught O'Malley's big Irish face. He was sliding slowly backward into the ship. The flash wallowed into the green water, until its light was drowned.

Another spurt of flame. That time a bullet seared Dick's thigh. He leaped into the air. He felt much as a sack of feathers trying to leap from earth. His leap was slow, but it carried

him high and far. It fooled Kris who expected him to fling himself upon the ice, for another bullet whinged close, sending up a shower of ice particles. But Dick had lost his gun.

He came down almost on top of Kris. The latter either heard or saw him for he yanked his gun about for a deadly shot. Dick lunged ahead and gripped the barrel ducking his head until it rested across his shoulder. Kris dragged it down inch by inch, until Dick could feel the muzzle edging down along his shoulder into his neck. Remembering the lightness of bodies he braced a foot in a crevasse of the ice and with a sudden upward swing brought Kris, rifle and all, up over his back.

Kris pulled the trigger and the exploding powder seared his coat and left little strings of fire in the cloth. But the gun came free and Dick flung it out into the night. Kris swore and charged with his head lowered to find its mark under Dick's ribs. The blow sent him reeling for ten feet, but he picked himself from the ice and rushed. He was getting angry now. Much as he realized that coolness alone would conquer the big blonde, the thought of all that Kris had done to repay their kindness gave him a burning desire to treat the man to some of his own medicine.

He rushed in with violent swings to the paunch and the jaw, swings which should have landed to knock out any ordinary man. Instead they seemed to have little effect. One right cut under the jaw lifted Kris entirely from his feet and pushed him up into the air as though he had mounted stilts, but when he dropped he was swearing but evidently unhurt. It became more and more certain to Dick that with the light weight the planet gave them both, he could never land a blow that would knock Kris out. The blows had nothing solid to back them up, one or the other of the men bounded away as though they were toy balloons. It was as though he were pounding a wind bag held by no string. That thought gave him the idea. Even a punching bag could be given a good hard wallop when held in one's grip.

CHAPTER IV.

Mutiny!

ON his next charge he locked and caught Kris by the scruff of the neck, and then swinging back with his right he brought in a smashing blow to the jaw.

Kris bellowed as Dick came with an even more violent blow to the paunch. Hitting below the belt was not Dick's code of fighting, but he was mixing it with a man who had shot down two of his crew and was trying to get him at any cost. He could not be scrupulous as to where he put his punches.

The last blow doubled Kris into a knot. Dick leaned over him long enough to lift his revolver and then made a swift run for the ship. Virginia was the one thought in his mind. He saw her in the light where he had last seen O'Malley. She too was whipping her flash about the ice trying to discover him. When it did find him the flash snapped out and he saw her hands fling up in some kind of gesture where the dim light of the room revealed her in the port hole. He felt something rasp across his face. It was a rope!

He scrambled up with the agility of an ape but heard Kris grunting and scrambling for the gun. He shouted, warning Virginia from the light. Instead she poked a rifle barrel through the porthole and played such a tattoo of rifle fire about Kris that he was glad to spring back to the protection of the ice.

When Dick crawled into the ship he closed the steel shutters and drew Virginia into his arms. He felt as though the miracle of resurrection had given her to him again.

As they stood there a long while—unmindful of Kris banging away at the steel sides of the ship—Virginia told him briefly what had happened while he was alone upon the sea.

She had returned to the control room to find Kris at the controls. Upon demanding where Dick was, Kris had overpowered her and after binding her had buckled her into one of the belts. Then the fuel had given out and Kris had been forced to return to the water. The crew had protested at Kris's control; they were afraid Dick might not agree with the attempt to return to earth; and yet they were afraid for the weird phenomena of the Marine sphere. O'Malley and McGregor had remained firmly loyal, but attempted no interference hoping to find some way to outwit Kris who had the only weapons.

Back on the sea they found the rising ice. Knowing that should the ship freeze there would be no hope of getting away even after sunup, unless the ice melted during the daylight, Kris set the men to pushing the ice cakes clear of the ship and sent Dennison out to search with the hope that he might find a barrel of gasoline.

Dennison soon came back with the word that he had discovered a steel barrel of fuel about three hundred yards from the ship, but he needed a bar and axe to get it loose from the ice.

Kris sent him back and prepared another attempt to take off. Dennison came back with the barrel and there was a lot of excitement as the cap was unscrewed, but the fuel proved to be lubricating oil.

Kris sent out more men in search of fuel and became enraged as they returned empty handed. He cursed and swore and prodded the men working the ice, threatening to shoot every time a man complained of frost bites and asked time to warm himself inside the ship.

"Just as he was about to send three of the men out in another search for fuel," Virginia went on, "I saw a great flare spring into the snow veil. Of course we guessed it was you and begged Kris to let me go. He did not answer and left the ship. O'Malley got into the control room in some way while Kris was prodding the work outside and released me, but made me promise I would wait a bit and let him see what he could do. I slipped outside and lay waiting, watching your fire and wondering what I could do to help you.

"The men worked wearily, none of them had

had any sleep since the ship took off. The ice would not stay clear. The growing piles about the ship were unstable and broke up to crowd into the clear channel, until they froze to solid ledges. But more and more ice came up from under the water. Try as we did, we could keep no more than five yards clear about the ship. Finally the cook threw down his axe and swore. He had enough he said. Might as well try to bail out the water under the ship as pull out that flood of ice cakes.

" 'Get that scientist back on the job,' he railed in conclusion, 'He'll get us out of this, you big hunk of bologna!' "

She shivered and pressed a white hand upon her eyes.

"Kris shot him in cold blood," she went on, "Then he shouted at the men who had paused to listen to the cook, for I believe each of them secretly believed what the cook had dared to say. 'Dig in you,' he roared, 'and the next that complains gets the same dose.'

" 'This has gone far enough,' Riggs shouted, and raised his axe. Kris aimed his gun, but did not fire. Something changed his mind, maybe it was his determination to take off. We were already unable to keep back the ice. If he had no care for a man's life, he did care for his muscles. There were left only Riggs, O'Malley, McGregor, Dennison and myself. I wasn't much at prying the ice, though I did all I could.

INSTEAD of shooting, Kris leveled his gun into aim and gave Riggs the count of three to change his mind. He stood stubbornly refusing to yield and yet not quite daring to go on against that levelled gun. Kris held his aim and ordered O'Malley and Denison to tie him up.

"O'Malley told Kris where he could go. Dennison said nothing at all, but stood with his two hands holding his axe. Kris called to McGregor, but he had slipped away into the night. I could see this worried Kris a lot and that he was becoming more and more desperate and angry. By that time he swore furiously and blubbered a little like a crazy man. Finally he shouted at me and ordered me to tie Riggs up.

"The awful night, the unreal motionless snow, the piercing cold, and the ghastly feeling of being lost in a freak world had upset all of us, and when Kris turned his eyes on me they were big and horrible. He wasn't sane, he was a frenzied, unreasoning animal! I picked up the wire. Riggs put his hands together and held them out to make it easier on me. His bravery made me ashamed. I turned on Kris. I laughed at him.

"You won't eh?' he bellowed, the more enraged that I dared to refuse. He swore. He cursed in a way that staggered me. But I defied him.

"I was about two yards from Riggs, with McNeil and Dennison making a short semicircle before me. Kris came forward, walking cautiously like a cat. His automatic covered the three men as he advanced until he could reach me. Then his hand shot out and he jerked me from my position between him and Riggs and flung me far enough away to isolate me from the hesitating men.

"They were not afraid, that was plain by every posture and every line upon their faces. They could die, but they wanted to protect me, and that did not mean rushing the deadly menace of that automatic.

" 'Now you three,' Kris commanded, 'crowd up closer. Closer, now stand there and the first man that moves will get his.'

"He backed over to where I lay a bit stunned upon the ice.

" 'Get up!' he bellowed. I tried but my foot had caught in an ice crevasse and was turned so that I was slow in doing what he demanded.

" 'Get up,' he bellowed again, and that time he kicked me with his foot. It didn't hurt. I might have been too frightened to feel it, for I heard Riggs swearing, and I screamed at him, not wanting him to get killed. But he came on. Maybe he thought I was hurt. Kris brought him down at the second or third leap. O'Malley was a little apart from the group and stood there as long as I could see him.

"Then I felt myself picked up and found myself in McGregor's arms. He must have been waiting and watching out in the dark, for he and O'Malley seemed to be working hand in hand. As McGregor picked me up I saw O'Malley running and heard him shouting to attract Kris' fire. But McNeil and Dennison were also closing in and by that time McGregor had me inside the ship. Later O'Malley came in and shut the port hole. He wouldn't tell me what happened. McNeil and Denison never came up."

As she finished her story she stood breathing heavily from the excitement of her experience. Kris had stopped his senseless firing. But soon there came a hammering upon the steel, then a muffled voice from below.

"Let me in," it demanded, "I'll surrender."

Dick's eyes grew cold and hard. His jaws were set and his lips, usually so full and generous, were thin and determined.

"We'll have to do something soon," he said more to himself than the girl. "Ice is already closing the water and if we freeze fast we are done."

"What can we do?" she asked, "The engines died for lack of fuel. Kris left not a drop in the tanks."

Another pounding upon the metal side. "Hey, Dick. You can't do that way. "I'll freeze out here. I give up. You can't leave me out here to freeze!"

"Are you going to let him in?" Virginia asked her eyes growing a bit wide.

"We've got to do something," he insisted hardly knowing he had spoken. He was thinking, thinking hard.

"Are you going to let him freeze, Dick?" Virginia asked again and there was half a plea in her terrified eyes.

"Great Heavens!" Dick exclaimed leaping across the corridor to the gun case. Virginia looked at him puzzled, as though she thought he too had gone crazy with the rest of the world. He got out two rifles, two automatic 45's and

handed one of each to Virginia. Then he handed her a belt of cartridges as he buckled one about his own waist.

"You hold the ship," he commanded, "I almost forgot McNeil and Dennison. We can't leave them on the chance that they are dead. I've got to find them before we think of taking off."

"Kris?" she exclaimed as he opened the porthole. "I don't trust him, Dick!"

"I neither," he laughed as he flashed his light about over the ice, "but don't worry, I'll come back all right."

Her hand went to her mouth, doubled into a small white fist which pressed hard against her lips. Her eyes begged him to stay back, but she only said, "Oh, be careful, Dick, please!"

He picked up the lifeless body of O'Malley and shoved it through the porthole. There came a spurt of fire, the whine of a rifle shot and the dead plop of a bullet in flesh. Dick closed the port hole and ran hurriedly to one of the far side of the vessel. Opening it quickly he slid out into the night.

A New Phenomenon!

HE hit the ice skim with little force, but his weight, light as he was, ripped open the half inch crust and sent a shower of ice particles flying all about. Dick crawled upon an ice cake and lay very still. A dark shadow edged along the ice barrier from behind the ship. Was it Kris?

Dick pulled his automatic and waited cautiously. The shadow flipped from ice cake to ice cake, advancing steadily. Behind a large cake it disappeared and Dick waited. He was fairly positive it was not Dennison or McNeil and yet he could not be sure. One of them might be alive and have mistaken him for Kris.

Only the steady rhythm of his breathing marked the passing of time as he waited the attack he felt sure was coming. Every minute, every second was precious. The ice was thickening, freezing in the ship. Eternal winter was sinking its claws into the steel. He not only had to get the ship away but find some fuel to run the engines.

From behind the ice came the roar of a rifle shot, and there was a crackling and splintering of ice at his side.

"Is that you, Kris?" he called.

The answer was another shot. Neither McNeil nor Denison would have done that. It was Kris. But what had become of McNeil and Denison? He had to know before he left the ice and went back to the ship.

"Kris," he called compromisingly, "I wouldn't leave a snake to what is coming out here. Throw down your gun and I'll let you come aboard."

Kris laughed a harsh, uncompromising laugh, and fired again. Dick felt he had every reason to shoot Kris down, He believed he could end him with one shot, for a crack in the ice revealed a sector of the big body behind the cake. Yet he lay waiting. Something within him would not permit that deadly shot.

"Where are McNeil and Denison?" he asked after a bit.

Kris laughed with a tinge of triumph in his mirth. "Dead as mackerel," he came back, "You'll join them soon enough."

"You told me you'd surrender if I'd take you aboard."

"Too late," Kris snapped back, I've got you where I want you now."

There was another wait. Finally,

"I'm going to kill you, Kris. I don't want to, but you make it so I can't do anything else."

The answer was another shot and a shower of ice particles right in Dick's face. Kris was getting his location. Cautiously he moved about for better shelter.

And all the time Dick was thinking of Virginia and the ship. The pool about the ship was freezing thicker and thicker. Dick knew their chances of surviving were being frozen with it.

And then he noticed that his breathing was ticking off the minutes with a faster beat. He was soon gasping as though he had been running. His lungs in some way could not get their fill of air. He noticed also that the snow veil was lifting. Already the bottom of it was three feet or more off the sea. It was going up, not with the imperceptible slowness with which it had come down, but swiftly like an elevator. The yellow light of earth was returning like the moon rising into a dark night. He flung himself upon his back to get a better view of that snow curtain.

Dick knew almost at once what was happening. The tiny sphere of water did not have gravitational influence enough to hold the atmosphere against the pull of the much larger earth. Soon Marine would be as barren of air as the moon. Life could not exist anywhere upon it. The cold would flood in quickly with its blanket pulled off. The sea would soon be cracking and exploding to the stab of the cold.

Kris was still firing at intervals, unaware of what was taking place. Dick slid softly away. He had to get into the ship at once. Virginia's life and his own depended upon it. McNeil and Denison were surely dead or they would be making some attack upon Kris, or at least shouting their whereabouts upon the ice.

He rounded the prow of the ship. The light was now that of a bright full moon on earth. As he rounded the ship he saw Virginia at the port hole looking for him. Again she tossed the rope, but he made one swift search about before he went up. The increased light revealed McNeil and Denison not far from where Kris had been when Dick reached the ship. Both were dead. He ran back to the rope and went up it quickly, his lungs breathless, blood trickling from his nostrils.

Inside he shut the port hole and opened the oxygen valves. But his problem was far from being solved. In but a few minutes the ship would be frozen tight. With a few days it would buckle and break to the exploding ice. The engines had no fuel and the lack of atmosphere forbade a search for any container of gasoline floating upon the sea.

He took Virginia by the hand. She smiled at him.

"YOU'RE a brave kid," he said a bit huskily. "You'll need every bit that's in you."

"We're lost?" she asked.

"Not a chance," he admitted. "But there is a fool stunt I'm going to try. It's fantastic, hardly what one would call a chance, but it's all we have and with your leave," he bowed low in mock courtesy, "Madam, I'll sink the ship."

"What?" she cried. "No, let's stick it out here, suicide is cowardly."

"That was farthest from my thoughts, Madam," he continued his mock role. He pulled the lever which opened the flood gates to the hold. He put his arm about her encouragingly. "This sphere is all water. I am going to let the ship sink to its center, head it up the other way, pump the water from the hold, and we will float up, up, up, until we are on the sunny side where our sun engines can do their bit. Earth will be livable with the air back on its surface and there should be enough underground water left to nourish us until the satellites fall."

There came the uneasy feeling of a settling vessel, the long sharp cracking and popping of ice which strained at its hull.

"But there is no fuel, Dick, none at all. Not even for the pumps. Kris drained it all!"

"I'll find a way," Dick assured her.

"How?" she demanded.

"It's a secret," he said trying to make light of the danger, "You'll promise not to give me away to the prohibition squad?"

"You mean?"

"Sure, why not? A few barrels of mash, it will sour nicely as we settle down and down. A home made still, and presto, chango, corn into fuel! Simple, no?"

"But the law," she retaliated, rising to his mood.

"Made under government supervision," he came back at her.

"You're great, Dick," she exclaimed.

He walked over to the port glass to take a last look at the queer world under which they were sinking. His face sobered the minute he turned away from her. Dick was in no wise fooled as to the dangers ahead.

Beyond the porthole he surveyed the queer world for the last time, and wondered what new horrors were in store. The ship was sinking slowly, but surely. The ice field below rose steadily to meet the level of the port. And as it sank the clouds rose higher and higher from the sea until the big Earth rode clean and glowing like a copper shield. The sea was brilliant, the ice radiant with golden fires, as though they had found themselves marooned on some fabled island of beryl and topaz. Again the ragged fields of ice seemed all aflame, changing hues with every foot the ship sank.

He took off his cap in salutation to the brave men he was leaving there. They had died loyally in defense of the ship and Virginia. The circle of his vision narrowed with the descent of the ship until only the ice barrier—yellow, luminous, beautiful, sparkled and glistened like a great yellow opal, evil as one in the magic light. He gave one last look at the heavens beyond, stars bright as electric bulbs, in spite of the startling brilliancy of the big yellow earth.

There he saw a strange ghost-like thing, something only simulated by a whirl of nebula far out in space. It was a long cigar-shaped vaporous mass, whirling with its point straight toward the big yellow earth. The envelope which protected men, the life-giving air they breathed, was made visible by the burden of moisture mixed with it. It was being drawn back, a mighty cyclone across the thousand miles of cosmos, to the earth from which it came.

He watched it go hopelessly. How long his oxygen tanks would last and what conditions they would meet on the far side, should they survive, he had no idea. Watching it he saw the ice barrier rise beyond the port, the green water washed the edge of it. He felt the uneasy movement of the vessel as though it were a freezing bucket there in the ice and some giant hand was slowly beginning to turn it around. All about the ice fields became restless, there was a crunching and grinding of the ice cakes. The sea was beginning to whirl about as though caught in a vortex of the storm. He closed the port shield and found Virginia beside him. He took her hand and put an arm about her, offering her his presence to sustain her courage. She must know what they were risking on that trip to the bottom of the sea. Tremendous pressures would increase at every mile, even though they were but a fraction of those at the same depth of water upon the earth. The vessel had been built for shocks and pressures, but could any man-made vessel endure that under fifty or a hundred miles of water? Dick had his doubts. He had heard of water being forced through cast iron balls when lowered to a great depth in the old Earth sea. Yes, he had his doubts; but still he tried to smile reassuringly as Virginia's penetrating look searched his face.

And then he felt a bucking and swaying of the ship, a lunging and pounding of ice against the hold. A churning and turning which caused him to buckle both Virginia and himself back into their belts. Gravity again became disturbed and played freaks with the furnishings of the room.

"Don't worry, Virgie," he shouted as he fastened her into her belt, "I understand now what is going on. The sea is falling back to earth in a spiral. It is following the trail of the air, but less swiftly. Our velocity keeps us from falling directly to the earth, but it is not enough to keep us from falling. We won't have to sink the ship now. If our provisions hold out, and I am sure they will, old mother earth will have us back. She will have a new Adam and Eve to start housekeeping within a year at the most."

The End.

The Scarlet Planet

(*Continued from Page 205*)

mained regarding their guest. She was so exquisitely innocent and lovely that physical passion seemed hushed like a shamed thing in her presence. Yet the corporal feared, when familiarity should dull this delicate halo of innocence that nature would resume itself in the two healthy, combative young fellows above stairs, and they would fall upon one another in a fierce primal rivalry for the possession of this jewel of femininity.

BUT the little corporal held himself to be stuff of another sort than his companions. He had left the earth and journeyed to distant planets, ostensibly to gain his daily bread in the clean interests of science, but within this circle of effort was another circle, which was to aid in establishing the aims of the Runners of Navare throughout the cosmos. While within this second circle was the secret and inmost circle of his genius and purpose—to track down C-X, the Master Criminal of the known universe. There were but ninety-nine members of that inner circle, each sworn to kill C-X at sight.

Davidson had followed a rumor of the Master Criminal as far as Kopex, only to be compelled to abandon that planet in great haste with Bailee, Hal-Al, and the man Jaquet, and now he was sidetracked, and he feared hopelessly so, on this great scarlet planet, and must resign the palm of victory to some other member of the Ninety-Nine. Yet perhaps no man would ever achieve such fame as to track and destroy the subtle C-X.

But now, in the presence of this lovely girl, the little corporal felt himself slipping. Slipping back into the crude, easy harness of a man, from the difficult yoke and livery of an almost priestly purpose.

But, as their guest smiled and threw back her shining hair, Davidson suddenly turned, for Honor had tapped his shoulder and dragged himself upstairs from the treacherous quicksands of fancy. He joined his two companions, who had wrapped their hands in strips of cloth-like fabric and were fiercely boxing.

"We had best be moving along," he said, craving the saving salt of action, that he might not again be tempted by the too sweetly dangerous fancies of idleness. "A little action may show us a better plan than hiding away quietly for days."

He turned to the pilot board, to study it again when, glancing casually from the observatory window, he saw that the sphere was moving.

CHAPTER XX

The Relentless Prison

DAVIDSON smothered his ejaculation of surprise, almost alarm, as he realized the sphere was moving of itself. He tried to bring it to a standstill by pressing the accustomed key, but unsuccessfully. Then he sought to turn it aside, but it continued steadily ahead. He fussed a bit with the pilot-board, thinking it jammed; then observed that they were moving directly towards the great purple wall about the City of Forbidden Ladies. Had the sphere been caught in some current of power, by chance or purpose, and was being drawn towards the Forbidden City? Or had they been tricked by their fair guest below, who was familiar with some secret method of directing the sphere?

He informed his companions of the situation, and they decided to go below and learn if the girl had started the sphere, or if she could stop it. But they were unable to make her understand. They used every civil persuasion, and when it came to uncivil persuasion none of them would volunteer or be conscripted for the harsh purpose.

"If I can't get her to smile it out, I'll never make her weep it out," said Hal-Al. "Let's get out of here and put up a clean fight in the open."

They tried the bolt that released the door, but while the bolt moved freely the door refused to open. They were trapped by a secret bolt. Davidson raised his automatic and sent a projectile through one of the side observatory windows, thinking to shatter the glass-like substance, that they might escape from the sphere by this means. But the steel projectile merely passed through the window clean as a die. Then, with the butt of his automatic, for there was no heavier object to be had, he sought to shatter the transparent sheet, but it neither cracked nor loosened, and but dented very slightly.

They scattered about the sphere, seeking to find way of escape, but unsuccessfully. Davidson smashed the pilot-board, hoping to turn the sphere from its course, if not stop it; but it continued directly ahead towards the purple walls, as insensible as time to persuasion.

Bailee sighed. "We might as well expect trigonometry to have a heart and change its self-determination as for this big marble to turn aside. If I was only in Mexico now, wouldn't I go up and see auntie Columbia quick!"

"You're a coward and afraid to die!" rumbled Hal-Al. "Go wash your petticoat!"

"You lie!" grinned Bailee. "It isn't leaving life, I mind; it's leaving the girls. There may be spiritual girls beyond death, but I fear these spiritual girls have no kick in them."

"There'll be a kick wherever I go, or I'll put the kick in it," scowled Hal-Al. "We'll line up here beside the door, and the instant it's opened, we'll smash!"

They fell to examining their automatics. Hal-Al had four shots remaining, Bailee none, while Davidson had two. They divided even, this giving each man two shots for a break for life and liberty.

"I don't feel my time is coming yet," growled Hal-Al. "But I feel there's a hell of a time coming for some one else!"

"Fooh!" said Bailee. "These scientific fellows here will just have to snap their scientific thumb-

and-digit at you and your head will drop off, like—"

"Like what? Go on, finish your fool comparison. What! your elocution legs haven't become palsied at the sight of death, that you must sit down on the first comma and gasp for breath. I thought your jaw would carry twenty words into death, like the muddy Amazon carries twenty miles into the clean Pacific. Like what?"

"Save your breath to cool the sulphur pudding you're soon going to eat," grinned Bailee. He extended his hand to Hal-Al. "Shake hands before you go! I have been chosen to remain with life, you have been chosen to go to death! Life, the blonde, and death, the brunette! Girls of Fate, Hal; and you for the dark and me for the light. Step before the curtain, Hal: Death has called you out to clap you, and hand you his bouquet of persimmon blossoms. while Life is waiting for me around at the stage door, with a hat full of love-notes."

HAL-AL shook hands. "Death has lost its sting to me, since I hear you are to remain behind!"

Bailee turned to Davidson. "I have a few words to say to you, before you cross the Great Divide. Take them and cherish them, for where you go there are no more words, since words are unavailing. Remember, always I loved you, not for what you were but for what you might have been. Look after Hal, for I need not ask you to look after yourself. The foolish lambs need to be led to the pastures, but the goats have already fenced the choicest pastures with barbed-wire. Fear not the devil, for you have served him faithfully these many years, and now you go to your reward. Man, born of woman, is reborn of many other women before he dies, and there you will meet them all, Belle, Margaret, Kate, and fat Louise. And so, Farewell!"

The little corporal shook the mocking fellow's hand somewhat grimly, for they were now approaching the purple wall at great speed, as compared with their former progress. Was the game about over—were they but helpless pawns to be swept from the plane of physical existence by the hand of destiny, to be arranged again and played as pawns in a greater or lesser game on the yet invisible plane of spiritual life. Or to be chucked into the discard of unconsciousness and oblivion?

Suddenly the sphere slowed down. Then they came into the shadow cast by the purple wall, a broad gate swung open before them, and they glided into the City of Forbidden Ladies.

"All out for Omaha!" grinned Bailee.

"It's sweet and clean, like Chicago—since you left it," growled Hal-Al.

"Now I am about to die," said Bailee. "I will tell the whole truth about Chicago. Chicago—"

The door of the sphere glided open and Bailee's jaw shut like a steel trap and his gray eyes glinted dangerously. Hal-Al, with a step, placed himself by his comrade's side. Davidson knew that they would die together, fighting for each other to the last. He sprang before them. He might stay death a moment till they had found an avenue of escape. He had fetched them to this scarlet planet and lost the great plane, and so deserved to receive the first thrust of calamity. Besides, he was a courageous man, and jealous of his honor. He would lead them against the enemy.

The girl stood to one side, holding in her hand the clear blue vessel from which the men had lately drank. It was filled with water. She seemed to scan the water, as if it were a crystal in which Futurity was writing an important message. Suddenly she left off scanning the water and came and poured it before Bailee's bare, tanned feet. Then, putting down the vessel, took her position on his left hand, gazing levelly before her in clear-eyed content.

The End of C-X

BAILEE grinned. "Never mind, my girl, you needn't pour your heart out at my unfrocked feet like water. I'll drink it from your lips as I want it, and if death doesn't win the next throw out of the little old dice box of chance, I'll get a shave and hair-cut and marry you, and all the little honey-fisted Joys will fill our days and nights with peach blossoms and bubbling rainbows."

The sphere now came to a standstill, but though the door was wide open the men hesitated to leap forth, for there was a hush as of death itself just without.

"Let 'em make the first move," rasped Hal-Al to Davidson. "Then we'll smash!"

They waited, but the enemy was too cunning to make the first move. Or else did not need to make any more, for the three men were already fast in the trap.

Davidson stepped from the sphere. He was no coward, but there is a circle of fear in every man's heart that cannot be wholly removed. Its eradication would shortly remove the physical man himself through his total disregard of dangers, and this circle in the little corporal's heart now dilated in the presence of real or imagined danger till he paled slightly. Had he been able to recognize the danger he might have smashed at it and gained courage from the blows that warmed his blood with action, but though he believed there was extreme danger near there was nothing to lift his hand against. It was like fighting emptiness.

Then he gasped, as his eyes adjusted themselves to the brighter light without. Close on his right was docked the great planet-plane, with its fore-port thrown wide open and the bridge down. He turned to Hal-Al and Bailee standing just at his back, staring at the plane. Beside Bailee stood the girl, with her hand in his.

"I'll go first," Davidson directed. "If I'm not stopped, follow at once."

He was about to dash across the open space lying between him and the plane, when two figures came from the open port of the plane and advanced towards him. The situation was as bare of all theatrical accessories as an ancient Greek tragedy, yet it was as dramatic to Davidson.

There was no mistaking one of the two figures

approaching. It was the man Jaquet, who had treacherously overcome the little corporal and made away with the planet-plane. His companion was a woman, and her vivid beauty was such that at first sight reason skipped a beat in Davidson's brain and a fleeting madness pulsed to possess her. She paled the exquisite girl beside Bailee as scarlet pales a delicate pink. Hal-Al gave a look and was lost.

Jaquet lifted his hand as a sign of silence, and a strange smile of power played about his thin lips.

"It has pleased myself," he said, in his deep, sonorous voice, "to invite you into the City of Forbidden Ladies, and since I have been informed by secret communication that you have saved the friend of my fiancée from my blood-toads who found her chasing a love-moth outside the walls and stole her, I beg each of you to select of my ladies ten of the fairest to accompany you back to the earth as treasure of ineffable delight."

Davidson could scarcely remove his eyes from the woman beside Jaquet. If this radiant beauty was the latter's fiancée, who then was this man that he had appraised but as a penniless-obscure opportunist? "I thank you for your generous offer," said the little corporal, "but my purpose here is merely to recover the planet-plane and return to the earth, satisfied that since there appears to be no night on this planet, it will scarcely serve as a suitable habitation for a colony from the earth."

"You have seen but our day," replied Jaquet. "We have also a night of equal length, when there is no light but one small golden moon in the sky, and light not anywhere else but in the eyes of lovely women."

Then Davidson saw the fatal sign. It lay just above the high, thin nose, at the base of the high, thin forehead, the sign of C-X, the Master Criminal of the known universe. He had followed a rumor of this man to Kopex, but that very man had accompanied him there in the guise of a half-charlatan, half-philosopher, and he had never dreamt the truth, for only now had the sign become visible to him. Perhaps because only now, in a moment of relaxed caution, Jaquet had failed to conceal the sign with the trick of his high wrinkled brow.

THE little corporal swung up his automatic and fired, straight at the accursed sign, as he had swung up his automatic and fired at ten thousand glass balls thrown from a trap, that he might acquire the expeditiousness and certainty of mind and hand that would thrust out of the physical worlds this master criminal, who best served Lucifer, the Devil.

It was this man's secret and dastardly manipulation of power credits, while he was secretary of the Third Credit Board, that plunged the earth, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn into the terrible financial panic of '42, followed by the Great Inter-Planetary Pestilence, whose spontaneous receptive centers were not isolated and broken down by the Klung opti-serum until billions had died, or been hopelessly paralyzed. And it was his remorseless Iago humor that staged the Sid Savior, that enthusia-irritant whose mysticism incited the unspeakable race massacres of planet Cid Quix.

Besides these cataclysms of misfortune which could be directly traced to C-X, the Master Criminal, there were a hundred lesser atrocities that smelt too strongly of his unholy lamp of genius to emanate from any other light. Evidently the scarlet planet was his harem-star, where he retired from time to time to rest from his pernicious labors, and renew his physical body with the salts of 4-X-Olite.

The two steel projectiles from the automatic of the little corporal toppled the Master Criminal to the ground, where he writhed like a snake at the feet of his slayer. Seizing Bailee's automatic, Davidson emptied its contents into the writhing form, then casting the weapon down, shouted: "The devil is dead! Quick! to the plane before his blood-toads get us!"

He ran towards the open port of the planet-plane, and even as he turned and ran the darkness came. It may have been the night of the scarlet planet, coming upon them without any twilight in the dustless air. Or some celestial calamity may have instantly obscured the sun-star above them. In both instances a purely physical phenomenon of the physical cosmos. Or the transcendent powers of evil so suddenly released from the person of the Master Criminal may have been retarded an instant from absorption by the spiritual cosmos, and beaten back like a billow of smoke just before the flame bursts, and clouded and darkened an area of the physical world.

But whether natural or supernatural, or something of both, sudden darkness came upon the three men, and Hal-Al and Bailee were alarmed into flight almost at the heels of the little corporal. They dashed into the planet-plane, where Davidson hurled himself through the murky light to the pilot-board, while his companions shot the massive bolts of the fore-port.

In another minute the great planet-plane arose amidst a down-sweeping hurricane of hail and fire, that tore at the plane like furies at a living creature, and Davidson saw some sights through the pilot's observatory window that he would never speak of, for there are things for speech and there are things for silence, and of the latter were these.

The little corporal was confident that the sudden oncoming of darkness, and the fury of the storm that swiftly followed, had justified his acts to his two companions, for they did not censure him at all. Neither for killing Jaquet—Davidson was confident his bullets had killed the Master Criminal—nor for abandoning the scarlet planet. The two young fellows went about their duties of bringing the planet-plane back to the earth, as soberly and orderly as their superior could have desired, seemingly indifferent to the sudden turn of the wheel of adventure.

But Davidson was completely fooled by his merry companions. The instant obscurity had come over the scene, youth had leapt into the arms of youth. The girl from the scarlet sphere had leapt into the arms of Bailee, and the fiancée

of the Master Criminal had leapt into the arms of Hal-Al, and they had fled into the planet-plane through the murk, at the very heels of the little corporal. Here the two happy lovers had concealed their sweethearts abaft, with Chang and Chow, the cat and dog mascots, to amuse them when they were alone, and after landing on the earth they had smuggled them from the plane without Davidson's knowledge.

Some months later, after the store of 4-X-Olite, that the little corporal had gathered on the scarlet planet, was removed from the plane, tested, sold, and credited in his name and the name of his two companions, making them the richest of earth men, Davidson was invited to a dinner where Hal-Al and Bailee confessed in high delight to the truth about the two girls, and brought forth from an inner room the lovely and visible proofs of the verity of their confession, begging him to do the honors of Best Man at their formal wedding. Afterwards they presented Davidson with a great gold shield, on one side of which was a life-size image of himself in a kind of crude toga, killing a serpent with an automatic, while on the other side were several original verses, compounded of their best wit and affection, and reading:

John Howard Davidson

Without a doubt
A good old Scout!

He turned the trick
And nicked Old Nick!

Long may he live
To take and give,

And still believe
Truth's up his sleeve!

And when at last
His term is past,

And he is not
Here, nor forgot,

May Story limn
The Grit of him

And make his name
An heir of Fame!

THE END

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THE FEBRUARY ISSUE ON SALE JANUARY 1, 1931

Pithecanthropus Island

(*Continued from Page 237*)

"Well, in that case," answered Franklin, "we are in for lots of trouble. We shall have to bolt for our safety-ledge. That is why I propose to draw them up the river so that, if we cannot start the engines, we can dash down stream and cut across through that break in the jungle to the other side of the loop, instead of going around, to avoid being cut off. That is the chance we shall have to take."

"And what if in a forced flight through that jungle avenue we should happen to run into a number of the ape-men who may be returning just then from some hunt—and that howling horde at our heels?"

"Then we shall have to shoot our way through the best we can," replied the other.

So it was decided.

* * *

A few hours later, with the afternoon far advanced, the three had forded the river below the cliff-dwellings of the horde; and after skirting the jungle edge on the opposite side of the river, recrossed out of sight around the bend over the upper ford. A short distance farther, where the bluffs gave way to the jungle, the aviators entered the forest growth and tied the alarm clock well up in a tree. After timing the alarm so it would ring in an hour, they repaired to the other side of the river just below the horde. The alarm was of the intermittent type and could ring repeatedly for a long time at frequent intervals; it also had an automatic shut-off that silenced it for about fifteen minutes, before it began another series of intermittent ringings.

Taking their station near the lower ford across the river opposite the dwelling-place of the savage horde, yet keeping within observing distance, the three men waited for the alarm to go off, their hearts thumping with excitement. Would it work?

Presently, through the stillness of the jungle there came the clear sound of the clamorous bell. The effect on the ape-men was startling. Every one, male and female, old and young, stopped in their tracks and listened intently. Then silence. Again the insistent ringing, loud and clear. Every one of the creatures stopped again with profound attention, exchanging questioning glances and looking plaintively at one another, plainly puzzled by the strange sound, totally new to their ears. As the ringing kept on and off, it seemed to get on their nerves, fear and curiosity seeming to struggle for mastery. Some of the braver ones began moving slowly in the direction of the sound with slow, hesitating steps, the more timid ones taking to the safety of their ledges.

Most of the horde, however, remained where they were, evidently puzzled and undecided. After about five minutes, the intermittent ringing ceased. Gradually the ape-men calmed down, the more venturesome who had moved up a ways to investigate, decided to return; and presently the entire horde seemed to forget the strange luring sound which had so disturbed them.

The watching aviators were dreadfully disappointed. It had failed to work! What then? They exchanged rueful glances without saying a word.

Fifteen minutes later, the clamorous bell began once more. As it continued on and off, curiosity finally got the better of the ape-men. Gradually, singly and in groups, the entire horde moved up the river to investigate the source of the mysterious sound. Even the ape-children followed; and soon only two or three very senile males and a few females were the only ones who stayed behind, and even they walked up to the farthest end of the abiding-place.

As the horde of ape-men disappeared around the bend, the aviators ran to the nearby ford and over the narrow river crossing. Running swiftly to the machine, they soon found that, although it was battered and mauled, the engine, the wings and other vital parts had suffered no serious harm.

The sharp eyes of the few females and old males who remained behind soon saw them, and these laggards gave the alarm with shrill cries.

Swiftly and methodically the aviators worked; the propellers began to spin; and through the primeval setting there sounded the mighty blast of the three powerful engines.

Soon the returning horde was coming back on the run, brandishing their clubs and yelling with loud, blood-curdling cries. The foremost were now but a short distance away, running toward them with great leaping strides. *The Golden Gate* faced in the direction of the fast approaching ape-men, and with the three men safely inside, it began moving forward.

As Captain Franklin gave her the gun, the great plane bumped swiftly along, its great engines roaring; and with a final blast it rose into the air just above the foremost ape-men. Rocks and stones flew up in a shower, the apes' savage cries drowned out by the engines. The fugitives were off, and soon the strange scene below them was out of sight.

* * *

Twelve hours later, three tired aviators, weary, haggard but happy, circled over Sydney, Australia, their great conquering flight completed.

THE END

The Man of Bronze

(*Continued from Page 219*)

head like a punch-drunk prizefighter. He started up and ran for the secret panel, burst it open, and came face to face with a squad of operatives, headed by his own superior.

"Where the hell have you been all this time?" snarled Vaux, as they stared in amazement.

"Manning's wife just called up and said she was sure something dreadful had happened to him, as his worst enemy was hiding right here. She said you told her. We didn't wait to hear any more, but came right over, and when they didn't answer, we busted in the door."

"Did she just call you?" asked Vaux, panting with exertion.

"About ten minutes ago. But what's happened to you?"

"If that isn't just like a woman!" said Vaux, almost to himself. "She had to wait all this time! Oh,—me? Never mind about me. Just call an ambulance. Walk down those steps, and you'll find something interesting—and don't stumble over the corpses."

* * *

Two days later Freddie Vaux, once more the most eligible young bachelor in New York, sat in an easy chair, talking to Henderson, who had come all the way from Washington. Aside from a patch of plaster on his left ear, the darling of society was as irreproachable a fashion-plate as ever; his smile was just as quick, his wit as keen, and his eyes, if possible, a trifle more alert.

"We did what you told us," Henderson was saying. "That big fellow with the hole in his dome was the leader, all right. We searched him for his keys, and when we opened that vault in the wall we found plenty. Manning's formula was there all right, and the same formula in the most marvellous code I've ever seen—and I've seen enough."

"And he didn't telephone across the ocean, after all," said Vaux, with a sigh. "Ah, well—the least we can do is to copy his inventions. I want that big vacuum tube and all its apparatus for myself. And did you see the dictaphone in his car?"

"No."

"Go look at it," said Vaux. "It's as good as a wireless telephone. What did you do to Manning?"

"Oh, that was easy. We put the statue in the bath of blue liquid, tried a reverse current, and the metal came off, little by little. Underneath he was as black as coal."

"Graphite," murmured Vaux. "I almost got a coating of it myself."

"Well, we got off all the metal, washed off this soot, and laid him out for a decent burial. We never told his wife how he died. That would have been a little too much."

"What about Helmer?" asked Vaux.

"Prisoner in the hospital. He's confessed enough to implicate half the Hisalpinians in New York."

Vaux smiled faintly. "Do you know what his real name is?" he asked. And receiving a negative sign, he announced, "Vollmer."

Henderson's mouth dropped open." Vollmer! Oho! He gets another questionnaire!"

The chief rose to go. Vaux strolled with him to the door.

"Whether you like it or not, Chief, I'm through for this summer. I wanted a little harmless adventure, not an improvement on the Spanish Inquisition. I'm going to Catalina Island to relax with the swordfish, the sawfish, the tarpon, the sailfish, the sharks, and the pretty little devilfish, who don't come up to Kroll. I never appreciated the charms of these harmless denizens of the briny deep as much as I do now. And if I land a killer whale, known as a cannibal whale, I'm going to name him Kroll, and send you his picture."

"Go to it, kid," said Henderson. "I'll reserve the place of honor in the family album for a photo of the greatest scientist in Hisalpina."

THE END

IN THE MARCH ISSUE OF WONDER STORIES

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The Reader Speaks

In WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY only letters that refer to stories published in the QUARTERLY will be printed.

Breaking His Heart In Two

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

As the popular song goes: how can you be so charming, charming, when you're breaking my heart in two? It isn't fair for you to make the Fall QUARTERLY so *wonderful* that, instead of doing my English homework, I read it instead. But on the other hand the reason why you are so charming: for printing not only exceedingly interesting stories *but* stories with real science that, although many may not know it, are a great help to students. I was, because of the excellent science contained in them, allowed to give a book report on both "The Stone from the Moon" and "Electropolis". I am also able to use the stories printed in "our" magazine to gain information on a theme I have to write for school.

Now for comments on the new issue: the cover was unusual, as might have been expected since it was from the brush of Paul. I'm glad to see it in a new color too; the silver and gold was all right for a year but we needed a change. The stories: why bother to try to figure out which is best? All I need say is: all are masterpieces especially "Between Earth and Moon" and "The Struggle for Neptune."

As for the list of science fiction movies I can add "Our Heavenly Bodies," a story of space-travelling to the different planets. I do not believe it has been released in America yet but it should be in the near future.

My opinion is that, of all the stories printed in the previous issues, "Electropolis" was the best for the long stories with "The Moon Conquerors" next best; "The Monsters of Neptune" the best among the shorter stories and "The Eternal Man Revives" the best among the very short stories.

Now for some questions:

1. Which is correct: Venusians or Venerians? Half the authors call them by one name and half by the other.

2. As a two-dimensional bullet would not harm a person possessing three dimensions, then is it true that a bullet of three dimensions would not harm a person with four? Of course no one actually knows but I would like your opinion.

Nowadays we have pee-wee golf everywheres and it seems that we are to have pee-wee Wonder Stories starting with the November issue. Is this going to be true of the Quarterly or will it remain the same size?

The saying is: my country, right or wrong. I have altered that saying, slightly, and it now is: "our" magazine, good or better!

Forrest J. Ackerman,
530 Staples Avenue,
San Francisco, Calif.

(Regarding the question of the appriateness of the terms Venusians and Venerian, we would say that Venerian would be more classically correct and Venusian more pleasing. The names of the planets have followed

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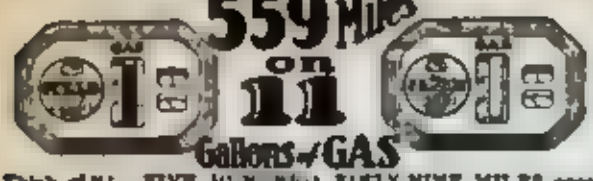

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The Reader Speaks

(*Continued from page 284*)

the nomenclature of the Roman gods and goddesses. "Of Venus" is *Veneris* in Latin; Venusians would therefore be Veneriana. But the term has unfortunately unpleasant connotations and we prefer editorially Venusians. Classical scholars who have special knowledge on the subject, however, are invited to send us their comments. We would rather be right than editors!

We are somewhat in doubt regarding Mr. Ackerman's "two-dimensional bullet." If he means a strictly two-dimensional object it would have zero thickness and therefore could not exist. There are really no two-dimensional objects. Two dimensions are merely used to represent planes, not objects. The top of a flat table represents two dimensions, but it would of course be impossible to take the top from the table without taking a third dimension with it.

But assuming the existence of such an object it might strike us and penetrate between atoms of our body without disturbing them. (It would be infinitely thin.) Of course the question is a theoretical one and cannot be answered with reference to real life.—*Editor*)

But It Was Worth It

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

You kept me waiting quite a while for the Fall edition of the QUARTERLY, but it was worth it.

Looking through it I find the best cover you have had so far. There is a mistake on it however. The story described the sky as being black with many stars visible. The cover had a blue background with no stars.

I also find that you are using a much better grade of paper than that used previously. It is not as bulky.

The first story in the magazine, "Between Earth and Moon," by Otfrid von Hanstein, is also the best. It is your best novel since "The Moon Conquerors", by Romans. Paul's illustrations for it were very good but I would rather see a full page illustration at the beginning of the story instead of a double-page one.

"An Atomic Adventure," by William Lemkin Ph.D., is a "different" type of a story. It was very well written and very interesting.

"The Island of Terror", by Ransome Sutton while not as good as "An Atomic Adventure", was not a bad story either.

Then comes "A Struggle For Neptune," by Henrik Dahl Juve. All I can say about it is give us another sequel. I believe that is enough.

"The Secret of the Tomb," by R. Crossley Arnold is the story I gave second place. The only fault is its abrupt ending. It could have been much longer and still be as interesting.

And lastly comes "The Revenge of the Chosen," by Thomas H. Knight, by no means a poor story.

What's this! A decrease in the amount of reading per page? How come? Why waste so much space for margin? I think that you should have not more than a half an inch margin on all sides so as to have as much on

(*Continued on Page 286*)

Radio Bargains

This month we are offering a great variety of battery sets at such ridiculously low prices that they cannot fail to astonish you.

These sets are so-called store demonstration models and are not sold as brand new. However, all sets have been tested and put into good shape and we guarantee them to be in good working order.

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The Reader Speaks

(*Continued from Page 285*)

each page as possible. You might also use a slightly smaller type of print. The quarterly should have twice as much reading material as the monthly.

Paul is your best artist with Miller running second and Marchioni third.

How about a few American reprints?

Jack Darrow,
4225 N. Spaulding Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

(Mr. Darrow gives us his usual well-put comments. The blue sky of the Fall issue was not intended so much as an exact representation of the scientific verity but as a means of obtaining a more pleasing color combination. Regarding Mr. Darrow's comment on the amount of material in the issue, we find by actual count that the Fall number contained approximately five thousand *more* words than the Summer issue.—*Editor*)

Has Real Atmosphere

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

The Fall number of your wonderful magazine was the best one issue. It could hardly be improved upon.

Regarding the stories; I placed them in the following order, in regards to merit:

1—"Between Earth and Moon"
2—"An Atomic Adventure"
3—"The Struggle for Neptune"
4—"The Secret of the Tomb"
5—"The Revenge of the Chosen"
6—"The Island of Terror"

Why don't you put a "Science Questionnaire" and "Science Questions and Answers" department in the Quarterly?

Wishing you the best of luck,

E. Anderson
1765 Southern Blvd.
New York City, N. Y.

(Mr. Anderson's suggestion is excellent; we may adopt the science departments in a future issue of the QUARTERLY. We are glad to note his complete approval of the stories in the Fall issue. From the letters received, our readers seem to think it the best issue so far. If that is true, how about the all-star Winter issue, now in your hands?—*Editor*)

Some Amazing Inconsistencies

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

In spite of your extensive staff of editorial critics, the story "Between Earth and Moon" is full of amazing inconsistencies. Most of them are trivial and have little effect on the yarn, but there are one or two that seriously weaken what otherwise might have been built into a good story. Here are some:

1. If the body were exposed in a total vacuum there would be disaster from the pressure. Think of the suffering of mountaineers, with less than half of the normal atmospheric pressure removed! Perhaps the artificial skin also maintained normal pressure on the skin, although from its description of flexibility it seems improbable unless adjusted so tight that free motion would be almost impossible. Where All Right leaves the rocket to rescue the others, he has artificial skin only on his hands. Under such conditions immediate and fatal hemorrhage would result.

2. In describing the appearance of the earth (P. 28) the author refers to the polar ice cap as being in the center of the disc. This could not be true unless the moon were approximately perpendicular to either the north or south pole, which it is not.

3. The author seems constantly confused about the appearance of the earth from the moon. When they arrive at the moon, the earth appears as a bright luminary. A day later it is in darkness, that is "a sort of 'new earth'." This is obviously incorrect. From the moon, the earth would appear to go through the four phases in 28 days. Since at this point in the story the moon is about in the new moon phase, the earth would appear almost in its fullness.

4. The fear expressed by the two reporters when they could not hear each other converse. With the helmet airtight and maintaining a correct atmosphere, each one's shouts would be perfectly evident to himself. Therefore, the feeling of being deaf and dumb would not occur.

5. The hatchets used for chopping the solidified oxygen and hydrogen would not be serviceable. At the low temperature prevailing, the metal would be so brittle that it would probably shiver to bits at the first blow.

6. *The meteor*. This is, perhaps the most serious error of all, since it was important in the discovery of oxygen. Meteors burn because of atmospheric friction. On the moon there is no atmosphere, hence no friction, and no incandescence. A body large enough to have been thrown off by an incandescent star, and retain its heat for a minute fraction of the time necessary for it to move from the nearest incandescent body to the moon, would have thrown moon and all to the other side of the universe.

7. It would be impossible to keep on the artificial skin at all times. If it were, as described, totally impervious to heat, it could not be worn constantly as the author describes. That would approximate the effect a dozen woolen suits have if worn at ordinary, comfortable room temperature. Even in the extreme cold described, a 24 hour hike with no loss of body temperature would run up a fatal fever.

8. The SOS signal. When this is given the rocket is circling the earth at a distance of from 60,000 to 108,000 miles (three-fourths of the way back to earth or 180,000 kilometers, both given as the position of its orbit). It seems impossible that the small amount of metallic matter described could be projected far enough toward earth to be seen as gigantic letters from the earth and still make a dense enough appearance to be visible at all. Also, the dust would not remain motionless in space as soon as the repulsive force had been expended; it would continue moving in a straight line at its initial velocity unless it encountered the atmosphere, and would at the same time maintain the linear, orbital velocity of the rocket. Since its mass was very light, it would very probably fly off at a direction almost a tangent, its linear velocity being modified only by the initial repulsive force and the slight

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The Reader Speaks

(*Continued from Page 286*)

influence of gravity. Therefore, it could never be seen from the earth.

9. The finding of the net. The net would either be right with the rocket, because it maintained the same velocity, or would be far beyond the rocket's orbit, depending on its mass. It would, of course, maintain the same linear velocity as the rocket, and would, if light enough, either become a wanderer through space or find its orbit much further away from the earth, which is improbable since the force of gravity would constantly decrease.

10. Egon would not remain near the rocket as long as described. For the same reason given in the preceding paragraph, he would probably fly away on a slightly modified tangent to the orbit of the rocket until free entirely from the gravitational influence of the earth.

11. It is even very doubtful if the rocket would have taken its place as a satellite. The initial explosion of all the repulsive force gave the rocket a velocity great enough to throw it beyond the gravitational influence of the earth. The start from the moon is described as being at a rate eight times that of the start from the earth. Then there was the second tremendous increase in velocity after they had been under way about 28 hours. The story is slightly confused here, but apparently the reserve supply of oxygen and hydrogen had gone "Boom Boom" at that particular moment. With such tremendous velocity, the rocket could scarcely have been caught by the earth. Remember, the start was just one explosion, with no further acceleration away from the earth, and must have given enough velocity to carry the rocket away from its influence. At 100,000 miles from the earth the acceleration of gravity would be only about .0005 feet per second. A ten-ton rocket would weigh less than half a pound.

These criticisms are offered from a series of notes jotted down while reading the yarn—not from an exhaustive study in the hope of finding bugs. The problems of terrestrial mechanics are far beyond me; all I have given are the conclusions of a layman in the face of irreconcilable inconsistencies.

Would it not be better, in stories of this character, to invent a flock of unknown forces, rather than try too much from our still limited knowledge?

Ted Leitzell,
644 Buckingham Place,
Chicago, Ill.

(Most of Mr. Leitzell's criticisms of "Between Earth and Moon" are well taken, and we are grateful for them. We wish however to point out that our policy with regard to stories that we purchase outright and translate are necessarily different than those that we buy in English. In the former case we do not feel permitted to make such detailed changes in the stories. It does often happen that the best of authors err in their calculations and deductions—yet they may not affect the main progress or the general value of the story. That was our conclusion about "Between Earth and Moon."—*Editor*)

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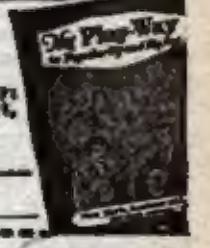

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